

HOTEL WITH A THOUSAND STARS

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PART I

PROLOGUE

WHY HUMANITY ON EARTH BEARS THE HIGHEST DESTINY

The Request

On a far-off world, deep in the constellation of Leo, a father summoned his son to consider a solemn request. The son sought permission to leave his planet and incarnate on Earth. Among his people - indeed among countless civilizations - Earth was held to be the spiritual heart of the universe. There lived the children whom God loved most, and precisely for that reason they were tested most severely. He knew they suffered and felt called to help.

As he waited outside his father's home, the first of the day's three suns sank behind the hills. All around lay only sand: not a tree, not a blade of grass. A deathly hush. Then, one after another, two moons rose quivering at the horizon - first a small one, then a silent giant. The larger swelled and drifted soundlessly past the smaller as night advanced. Five more moons, each on its own path, would soon join the dance.

As always in those regions, the day had been searing - small wonder with three suns. A distant central sun and two

satellites flooded the planet with light. Because of that radiance, the inhabitants could perceive everything on their world down to the smallest detail. Matter itself seemed transparent.

The heat, however fierce, troubled them not at all. They could bend nature to their will, regulating their own body temperature without effort. Nature kept no secrets here and stood wholly subject to the people's spiritual capacities. It was never truly dark. Nights were brief, marked only by a change of colour and a sharpening of edges.

Watching their unhurried passage, his thoughts wandered to Earth. The deep suffering of her people - unknown to him, yet keenly felt - lingered within him like a summons he could not shake.

At first, his father had advised him against it.

'You must leave them alone,' he had said. 'Practicing patience - that is our nature.'

Father had explained that it was sometimes wiser to let tragedy run its course. Their longing for love would only deepen because of it, and with that longing would come greater insight and wisdom.

Father was, of course, right. Yet he could not bring himself to accept it. Did father doubt the strength of his will? What he desired was surely also the will of the Great Master - Father and Creator of life. Who, then, could stand in his way? The situation was, he believed, too grave. He wanted to help. No matter what. To contribute to the great purpose that permeated this world.

Here there was no war, no violence, no hatred - nothing that could disturb the harmony.

They had learned that acting against the sacred order meant death. And yet everyone was completely free. Laws no longer existed; they had been abolished long ago,

rendered unnecessary. Only one principle remained: the source from which all had emerged and to which all would return - humble love.

The people of Earth yearned fiercely for that love, yet failed to bring it into being. They were in need. He believed he could mean something for them, drawing on all the knowledge and experience he had gathered over his many solar years.

The son clasped his hands together; the summons remained clear.

The Meeting with the Father

Lost in thought, he saw his father approach with open arms. They embraced and kissed, glad to be together. Smiling, the father took him by the arm and led him inside: a single-room dwelling, an igloo pressed from sand.

No furniture - only floor and walls. The floor was the same soft, warm sand as outside and offered all the rest one could need. On the eastern side a round opening rose to the roof peak, admitting unbroken light. Through it they watched the five remaining moons climb higher, beginning their celestial game.

The father's face was light brown, aglow with warmth. He looked no older than when they had last met - some fifty solar years earlier. Not that they had lacked contact: father and son shared thoughts and feelings whenever they wished, and appeared in one another's dreams whenever welcomed. The same was true of Mother, long since departed. Death had not severed their bond; if anything, it had deepened it.

Death was not a boundary but a fuller blessedness - in a realm of loved ones gone ahead. On this occasion, though,

the father had, most unusually, asked his son to come in person. The urge had come over him because this might be the last time. A crucial decision had to be made, one he had long seen coming. He wished to accompany his son as he chose, to offer insight - without steering the choice. His freedom must be respected at all times. The son smiled; he knew why he was here.

Prayer and the Beginning of the Conversation

'Let's sit and bless this conversation,' the father said. Together they prayed to the Great Master, asking for His wisdom so they might choose well.

'I've wrestled with this for a long time,' he said, meeting his son's eyes. 'I still think the risk is immense. I'm not sure it is outweighed by the good you might bring. Let me first sketch the spiritual state of the people you love so dearly. Then you'll see what you would be stepping into.'

His voice fell; the house held the silence.

Death on Earth

'People on Earth suffer because death holds the throne there,' the father began. 'They live in a world fenced in by the borders of death, with no obvious way out. To them, death is the irrevocable end of life, and that thought makes them afraid. In the short span they are given, they clutch at life: they plead with it, worship it, hate it, mock it, and love it. In short, they are spellbound by death.'

'Trying to escape, they exalt themselves, hoping to add value to a life tied to matter. But it only tightens death's hold. They feel this. Out of fear and anger at their captivity, they

turn on one another - and on themselves - and in the end they tear down what they hold dear.

'For us, death means nothing, because we know life does not end. It is infinite. The remedy seems simple: lift their fear of death, and they will be free. That fear makes them blind and tongue-tied and dependent. In their unknowing they mistake death for life, because they fixate on nothing else. They know neither life nor death. In truth, they do not know themselves.'

'They believe only in the visible and the tangible - which is precisely what passes away. They are attached to the physical and to everything that goes with it. Their lives revolve around satisfying their senses. That is their prison.'

'That the body is only a temporary lodging of true life - they do not know it, and they do not wish to believe it. So each chases his own cravings without regard for anyone else. You can imagine how much struggle, resistance, and fear this breeds. In the process, anything goes - even the killing of a fellow human being.'

He paused. Outside, a faint shadow slipped over the ground as the great moon crossed the central sun. The sky shifted from white to magenta to a tender rose.

The son looked at his father, stricken. The thought of such suffering - of a life that was no life, a fight without a way out - pierced him. Tears of pity ran down his cheeks. The father took his hand and stroked it gently.

When the son had gathered himself, he whispered, 'That must be hell, Father - a place where damned spirits have free play.' 'In a sense, yes,' the father replied. 'Humans have been stripped of power over nature because they refuse the will of God, whom we call the Great Master. They do not know Him and imagine they must manage everything alone, and so they tumble from one misery to the

next.' 'How could it come to that? Where is the Love of our Great Master, who could deliver them in an instant?' 'That is exactly their question,' said the father. 'They conclude God does not exist - for a loving God would not allow such misery. But they are mistaken. Their distress is not God's will but their own. And that will is free. Always. Let me tell you why.'

He looked through the round opening in the roof, as if awaiting a cue to continue.

The Origin of Life and Love

'God was, is, and will be - forever. He alone is power and might, and beyond Him nothing exists. He is the eternal primal force that saturates our being to its deepest depth. Yet creation did not arise from power and might alone. Love moved Him to create. Love is the humble heart of God - whom He Himself calls the Son.'

'At the stirring of Love, a great joy rose within God, and He gave Himself wholly to His Son. Between them a sacred bond formed, drawing together all His primordial forces into the infinite. As those forces fused, an all-pervading warmth came forth - as love always gives birth to warmth.'

But lest all be consumed by heat, God in His wisdom spoke the saving Word: '*Let there be light.*' And there was light.

'In that light, all spiritual life that is from God was illumined - and awakened. This is why God is also called the *Word*, for His Word is the cause from which life springs. That Word is Love itself. Through His Son, God became one with Love, and so every act of His became an act of love.'

'And here is the lesson: from the warmth of love comes light - God's wisdom; therefore love is the only path to

divine understanding. For us this is obvious. For the people of Earth, it remains a mystery.'

The son exhaled slowly; he recognized the source of life.

Free Will and the Law of Love

'God took joy in Love and shone with happiness. To bring His work to fullness, He wished others to share that joy as He did. So He created three angels: two smaller ones and one large one.

'The great angel - Lucifer - blazed almost as brightly as God Himself. Yet the angels were not conscious of themselves, nor of their Creator's Love. Their consciousness resembled that of an embryo in a mother's womb.

'To learn to know themselves - and to know their Maker - He endowed them, in His image, with self-determination: a free will. He also inscribed the *Word* upon their hearts - indelibly, for ever.

'In this way the Word became *Law*. And that *Law is Love*.

They were asked to follow it. By doing so they would awaken to their true nature - nothing but Love - and so share in God's glory, becoming one with His power and might. This is God's promise to all that lives.'

'Father - may I ask something?' the son said. The father nodded. 'I sense a tension. *Are we truly free if Love is a Law?* Is Love not being imposed - under the shadow of death? What becomes of Love when it is mandated, and what becomes of freedom? Are human fears not justified? Is it not understandable that they turn towards death, hoping for release?'

Father smiled. He knew that the answer already lay within his son's soul. The reason for asking the question,

then, was not self-interest. His son was seeking from him an answer born of love.

Every expression of love - wherever it may arise in the universe - finds its way to those willing to receive it. It never perishes, but grows like a branch on the tree of life, until it embraces all visible and invisible existence. Father looked at him with quiet understanding and gave him what he sought.

'Creation is not compelled. It is the free outpouring of God's infinite Love and bliss. No one can force God to create - or not to create.'

'For God, the Law is not a limitation, but the highest form of freedom. He knows no boundary in His actions and no constraint upon His will. The Law is the perfect expression of who He is: love.'

The Law was therefore not laid on the angels to confine them, but to awaken them to who they truly are. The inner struggle - between heeding the Law and wishing to break it - brought the angels, all but the greatest, to maturity.

Those opposing forces met again and again, turning like a circle. Each time they fought an existential battle - and each time Love prevailed. Thus the angels were formed into beings wholly free and self-aware - able to create as God does.

The Law is the path. Love the goal. And in the end, they are one.'

The son bowed in reverence and kissed his father's hand.

Lucifer and the Fall from the Light

The father regarded him warmly and went on.

'The greatest of the three angels - Lucifer - stepped out

of the circle of Love,' the father continued. 'When God held out a tiny flame of His eternal Love and told him to bow before it,

Lucifer could not accept that he should bend to something so small. He felt far above such an unimpressive flame.

'He refused. In fury he tried to annihilate God and Love. God burned with infinite *wrath* at Lucifer's defiance and hurled him - with everything he had shaped - into the deepest abyss of everlasting darkness.

'People on earth often misunderstand God's wrath. They believe that God intends to harm someone by it, that He punishes. This is not so. God's wrath does not arise from a will to punish, but from the fact that His love - life itself - is being attacked. For life springs from love and is love. Whoever seeks to destroy love destroys life and, in doing so, destroys himself.

'God's wrath is therefore not an act against humanity, but the inevitable resistance of love against its own destruction. In this way God protects life: not by punishing, but because love does not allow itself to be destroyed.'

One of the suns sent a straight beam through the window, while two moons slid below the horizon like shades.

The Tear of God and the Birth of the Earth

'As His Love is without limit, so is His mercy. Aeons upon aeons passed before Lucifer finally regretted what he had done. He feared life would be taken from him and longed, in his bleakest state, to be unmade.

'Then Love - His Son - turned to God and pleaded for

compassion. God did not set aside His wrath; He made Love an offer: "If you take Lucifer's guilt upon yourself, I will spare him." Love - boundless and pure - gladly accepted and thanked God with His whole being.

'God then returned to Lucifer, showed him the dim flame again, and asked whether he would bow to humble Love. Lucifer realised that if God came to seek him in this dark emptiness, His Love reached beyond His wrath. He bowed before the small flame and begged for grace and a place of rest.

'A tear of compassion fell from the Love of God. That tear became a vast sea of mercy, and Love breathed over those waters. The waters broke into numberless drops, and the small flame leapt within each drop.

'From this came uncounted suns; from those suns, planets; and from those planets, moons. From the heart of God's tear the Earth drifted towards Lucifer, and Love blessed her. The Earth was the resting place set aside for Lucifer, from which he could find his way back into the holy embrace.

'In more tangible terms, this meant the following. All the forces, ideas, and beings that had sprung from Lucifer were so associated and compressed that they could no longer escape into a free, independent existence. From that moment on, they were bound by the material laws of the universe. Within this limitation, love remained at work, hidden yet present. Thus began a path of purification, until they could once again recognize their destiny and return to a free, spiritual form.'

Outside, the wind picked up. A sandstorm was on its way. The son watched a dust devil sweep past the dwelling. They could have stilled the storm if they wished, but saw no need. It would pass quickly. Nature needed it. She, too, must be cleansed.

Adam and Eve

Father resumed his train of thought.

'The next phase in God's creation was *man*.

'God made Adam. The spirit of Lucifer - purified and tempered - took form as the first human. Humanity is the goal toward which creation tends: the last stage of the soul's passage through matter.

'God entrusted Adam with dominion over the universe, to govern it by his own discernment. For Adam, spiritual life - within matter and beyond it - was as plain and palpable as matter itself in all its shapes.

'Adam grasped nature's hidden workings, for he spoke with God - and thus with all that comes from God. Even so, three trials awaited him, to fortify his love for God. He knew this, yet in human form he felt different than he had as Lucifer. In Lucifer, all opposites were one; in Adam, they were not.

'He felt alone.

'Moved with compassion, God gave Adam a way to overcome that division: He brought forth from him his wife, Eve. God took from Adam the seed of evil that had lain in Lucifer and placed it in Eve, so that through love for Eve Adam might overcome the evil in himself. Adam rejoiced in his wife and loved her with all his soul, and in that love they were one.

'The first test came quickly. They lived in Paradise, loving God and loving each other. There they would have lived for ever - if they obeyed God. To that end, He set two trees in the garden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life.

'God forbade them to eat the fruit, for it would mean certain death. The serpent - the evil placed in Eve - tempted

her to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, promising she would become like God.

'Like Lucifer, Eve imagined she could equal - and ultimately surpass - God's power. Adam, loving his wife more than God, let himself be persuaded to do the same.

'Had they, in that state, also eaten from the tree of life, the ruin would have been beyond measure. So God sent them to another region of Paradise. He also withdrew certain gifts: they lost their insight into the hidden unity of creation and had to work to earn their daily bread.'

A ring of light from the opening drew itself around them.

Cain and Abel, and the Waning of God's Presence

'In that newly separated region of Paradise, Adam and Eve continued their life and had two sons, Cain and Abel.

'One day Adam passed a fruit-bearing shrub. He tasted a few, though he knew the plant had not been blessed by God. The fruit pleased him, and he fell into a stupor. He brought some home; his family ate - everyone but Abel, who was working the fields - and they too drifted into a daze. In that state, lust drove them to violate one another.

'When Abel returned, he found his family asleep and at once understood. He could not believe his eyes and wept. This time God showed no leniency: He sent the whole family out of Paradise and, except for Abel, stripped them of their special gifts. After Cain killed his brother, humanity learned the true weight of life - without the immediate closeness of God's Love.'

The son lowered his eyes.

The Coming of the Son

'Even so, God was patient and deeply moved by the human lot. His greatest act - the final redemption - was still ahead. Seeing that humanity, even under the light pressure of laws, kept drifting farther from Him, He sent His Son - Love - in human form to the Earth.

'He took upon Himself Adam's faults. He too was tested by Lucifer - yet He stood firm. Thus He finished what Adam had left undone and released him from his guilt.

'So that humanity too might be freed from the yoke of Adam, the Son proclaimed:

'I am the Light, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Whoever believes in Me and lives according to

My teaching already carries eternal life within and will neither see nor feel death.'

'The Son made it clear that love is the only path to redemption. He did not come to replace the Law - Law and love remain one - but to see it for what it is: love.

'As a guide, He gave humanity two simple commandments, in which all was summed up: '*Love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself.*'

'Thus a new era began.

'But people did not believe Him, loving the world more than their Maker. They delivered Him up to death and nailed Him to the cross of matter. His suffering and death became the ultimate proving of His Love. By His resurrection, however, He showed that death does not exist - and that we are all called to eternal life.'

Silence settled. The father set two glasses of water before them. There was no tap and no well. Water - whatever one desired - could be formed by a single, focused will.

Shaping matter into any form or composition was, for the people of that planet, simply ordinary.

All that was needed lay everywhere at hand. Even moving from one place to another cost them no effort. They could take on any form at will and, if they wished, be present in several places at once.

Why Earth Is Most Beloved

The father went on, gently: 'Now for the last point - perhaps the most important. Earth is God's dearest planet. The people there are closest to His heart. They are the true children of God. For He consigned Lucifer - the greatest and most beloved angel - to Earth. Earth endures the harshest trials because the spirit of Lucifer is at work there in full force within humanity. He exerts his influence and does what he has always done: seeking to subject life to himself.

'Even so, Lucifer's power is limited. On worlds far from Earth, like ours, his influence has largely ebbed - if it is felt at all. That we too inhabit material bodies still betrays his trace, but his spirit is so weakened that his sway hardly disturbs us.

'That also means our purification proceeds more slowly, since we meet little resistance from him. We hardly know the urge to break God's laws. So it is no great merit that we keep God's commands here; our freedom is limited in that respect. People on Earth must overcome evil - Lucifer - within themselves. That victory wins them *divine sonship*: the highest blessedness of heaven and the most intimate union with His Love. Then one is one with God.

'Out of a longing to reach their true self and to learn God's humble Love in freedom, beings from many other

worlds choose to incarnate on Earth. There, amid trials, they hope to become one with God.'

In the soft light the father's grey hair shone like silver.

What It Means to Become Human

'If you truly want to help them - as you say - you need to know what you're walking into. There is only one way into that world: you must become one of them. That means laying down the knowledge and experience you've gained here. You will forget everything - who you are, where you came from, why you came.'

'Otherwise you would not be free there. You will start from zero. Without us. Without God's felt nearness. Without any certainty that love is real. Traits that pose no obstacle here may become pitfalls there. Your very nature will be tested and exposed to temptations so strong that there is no guarantee you will not fall.'

'This raises another question: will you ever be able to return? And if you do not, a long road awaits - a journey of ages - to find your way back here. We will watch over you, but we may not steer you. Free will is life's holy sanctuary - even God does not trespass on it. Which also means: the choices will be yours alone.'

And yet the son wanted to go to a world where love is anything but obvious - a world so steeped in unknowing that it could destroy them, and perhaps him as well.

The son looked up, his gaze set.

'I know what you're saying,' the son replied. 'You're afraid of losing me.' 'Fear is not why we're speaking, my boy,' the father answered softly. 'I trust you will return in the end. What matters is whether your motive is pure. You say you want to help because they suffer. That is noble, and

Love itself urges it. But can you help them? Each person must walk a path of his own, and each is given the time that fits to come to understanding. Outside intervention, however well meant, is not always welcome.'

'But Father,' he protested, 'from afar we can only judge - at best nudge things in a better direction by offering the right promptings. If I am among them, I am one of them. Then I can point to things I learned here, and insight may come sooner.'

'Do not forget: the knowledge and wisdom you have gained here will count for nothing there,' the father said. 'And you do not know whether you will even have the space to help others. Your own troubles may claim you entirely. Have there not been the brave, in ages past, who tried to set them on the right course? What, exactly, do you think you will add?'

The question hung between them for a moment.

He had no answer. On the face of it, his father was right. What could he bring, with so many past attempts behind them? Perhaps it was enough to be patient and trust the promise of the Great Master.

Doubt, Motives, and the Call

What his father had laid out forced a choice. Doubt slipped in. Uncertainty settled on him - a feeling he had not known for ages.

Is this really a fool's errand? he asked himself.

He could not accept that; it would mean surrendering his deepest dream. And yet the dream was starting to crack under the strain. He bowed his head and looked again. What did he think - that he alone could rescue a world? No. He knew better. His only motive was love for

those people. Was that not enough? Is love not reason enough?

His longing to live among them kept growing despite his father's warning. At the same time he knew: strictly speaking, the mission was unnecessary. All would unfold as foretold. Why risk everything he had built - to begin again from nothing?

Slowly he understood there was only one true reason to go: to answer the call that now rang through him like a clear note - the divine sonship. Then all would come into place. To be a child of God - by loving Him and loving people - so that path and goal become one.

The silence between them grew deeper.

Sitting cross-legged, their long robes draped over their knees, father and son remained face to face for a long time.

The White Shadow: the Final Trial

'I think I know,' the son said. 'I think so too,' the father replied, serene.

'Now that you believe you are sure, it's time for the last trial - the "white shadow", as we call it. If you pass it, the last inner resistance to your choice will fall away. You will become aware of your hidden self - your shadow.'

'Like the angels God created, consciousness is formed as a circle where opposing forces meet again and again. The shadow is the counterforce in that circle, for ever contending with your love. The point is for the light to enter there as well. Only then can you set your will in full awareness.'

He looked at his father and smiled. Was he ready? In his heart, he knew he was. They both closed their eyes.

The father set his hands upon his shoulders. A deep

tremor ran through him, as if the ground itself had begun to quake. Images and feelings broke over him - as if another life were already happening to him.

By the sheer force of his father's imagining, Earth's tensions became tangible. Emotions struck him that did not exist in his world - not even when he had fixed his attention on Earth. In thought he had sent them a steady stream of love to soften their pain. What he felt then had shown him the battle they were fighting. Again and again he reached the same conclusion: they did not know what truly lay at stake. He wanted to supply what was missing - at any cost - so their suffering might cease.

But what he saw now was of another order entirely. He was swept up into a storm of emotions that raged through him from every side and tugged at him. There was no point of hold to be found.

Images flashed through him like hallucinations. Sounds rang like echoes inside a breaking head. He heard his own voice calling - but no longer knew it as his.

He was at the mercy of forces he did not know, fighting wildly against powers that tried to master him. It felt as if he were being torn to pieces. His grip was slipping; darkness seeped into his soul.

Something like madness took shape - he could no longer tell what was his and what was not. As though he were fraying between dream and nightmare, between spiritual trial and the loss of self.

For a moment it was as if he did not exist at all - only a stream of impulses without a centre, without aim, without a self. He could only fall - or let go.

Then, all at once, stillness within. Nothing. Cold gathered. A boundless emptiness opened. The ground gave way; a bottomless black yawned beneath him. There was no

escape. He was swallowed and fell, endlessly, into nothing. Every way back to his present world was closed. An eternity seemed to pass. Despair took him. Love, warmth - everything was gone.

A deep, jeering voice spoke: 'Do you truly dare to take me on, child? First see if you can climb out of that hole.' A cold laugh filled the void; as it faded into the endless, it pulled the last of his hope along with it.

Another eternity passed, until he remembered a call - a clear note that had once permeated his being: *the divine sonship*.

He cried with all his strength: '*God, help me!*

The word fell like fire into the deep.

The Decision

In that instant he returned. His father's hands slipped from his shoulders; heat ran through him from crown to sole. The holy fire - his love for humankind and his longing to be one with God - filled him. This was the way. The only way to face Lucifer. He turned, met his father's gaze, and said, '*I will go.*'

The father nodded. Nothing more needed saying.

The Farewell and the Passage

'Let us call upon the Great Master and ask Him to stand with you,' the father said. They joined hands and sank into deep silence. The father's love warmed him to the marrow. Then, slowly, the cold drew in.

'Your spirit is already on its way,' the father whispered. 'It will soon leave your body behind.' He embraced him and spoke his last words: '*I love you - unto eternity.*'

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MEMORIES

IMAGINATION, BELONGING,
AND THE END OF INNOCENCE

Birth

Sixteen years after the Second World War, I was born in a little village tucked into the southeastern corner of Drenthe in the Netherlands, near the German border. I was the first child in our family, the first grandchild on my mother's side. Two and three years later my two sisters arrived.

When I look back on my childhood, a handful of memories keep returning.

A Child's Paradise

My imagination ran wild. I could lie awake for hours, dreaming up the world as it ought to be - childish visions of a better place where everyone was, above all, happy. I pictured life inside a vast amusement park, filled with rides I invented and could lose myself in completely. The model was Ponyparque Slagharen, where we went on holiday in the summer.

I loved it so much that for weeks beforehand I could

hardly sleep from excitement. We rented a small cottage and were assigned a pony with a cart. The cart barely mattered; I wanted the pony. Luck helped - some ponies were sluggish or stubborn. If you drew a bad one, you could swap and hope for a livelier mount.

I already knew how to ride; I'd learnt at the farmer's across the road. With other children from the park I'd head out and range over the grounds like real cowboys. Next to the holiday park was the amusement park - our fair. We had free run of it all holiday long, which felt like a privilege.

For me, it was the closest thing to paradise a child could imagine. I was sure a world existed where everyone could be happy. Lying in bed, I kept elaborating it and felt bliss at the thought of how we might make it more beautiful still.

Thought-Transparency and a Stern Conscience

Alongside those happiness fantasies lived another conviction. As a child I believed people could read my thoughts. Lying was out of the question - even in my head. I kept my inner life on a tight leash lest I get into trouble.

It felt as if we were transparent to one another, as if feelings and thoughts were held in common. Over time I realised I was alone in that experience. No one seemed much concerned with what one thought or said. When people were untruthful, I was baffled. Wouldn't others notice? Usually, they didn't.

Over the years the idea that I had to be pure in my thoughts faded. I no longer had to justify myself, yet it brought no satisfaction. As that sense of purity waned, so did my sense of belonging. It was as if something dimmed - an inner light, invisible to others yet unmistakable to me.

The freedom I gained lacked the safety of inward togetherness. In the end I went looking again for the connectedness of the beginning I'd felt so keenly as a child. But the sharpness of feeling had dulled. Reason had led me astray.

Too much doubt had seeped into my thinking. That road was closed. Only memory remained - as if I had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and had to "die" before finding my way back to oneness.

A Distant Echo: Spiritual Memory and Where I Came From

From an early age I felt I came from another planet. I had no clear memories, yet the sense of connectedness I first knew may have been an echo of that life.

It was no settled knowledge. Often I dismissed the idea of a former life as fantasy. Yet it kept working on me - above and below the surface. It steadied me in times of doubt. Then I could believe my time here was temporary - that I was a traveller moving through this life to gather the experiences that fit me. There was a plan - or at least a direction - and so long as I felt it, I had something to hold on to.

Seed of Longing

These memories - of belonging, of inner clarity, of another origin - carried a seed of longing that never left me: a homesickness for the first light.

THE PRODIGAL SON

ADRIFT ON A PARIS NIGHT

Running Away from Home

Two weeks after my sixteenth birthday, I came home from the pub late on a Saturday night. To my surprise, my father was waiting for me – something he never did. According to him, I was far too late. I wasn't in the mood for his scolding and snapped back. Within minutes it had blown up into a full-blown row.

Things between us had been bad for a long time. We hardly spoke, and when we did, it was usually in raised voices, accusations poised on our tongues. The fact that I had supposedly stayed out too late didn't bother me in the slightest – I was already living as I pleased.

At one point he said, 'If you won't listen, then you'd better leave.'

The feeling that I didn't belong there had been gnawing at me for some time. In silences, in looks, in words left unsaid, it had grown like a splinter. It made me angry, but it also made me sad. Now he had spoken it aloud for the first time.

There was nothing between us: no affection, no understanding, no sense of worth. Just emptiness.

I thought: 'If you want me gone, then I'll go.'

Out loud I said: 'Fine.'

I stormed upstairs. This was it. No turning back. I rummaged through my desk for my passport, slipped it into my jacket pocket, and took the last of my money – about twenty-five guilders. Without another word, I went downstairs, opened the door, and walked out.

The First Night

It was already well past midnight. I headed towards Schoonebeek and tried to hitch a lift, but the road was deserted. Just outside the village, on the way to Coevorden, a car finally stopped. As I climbed in, I felt a surge of freedom – as if I had crossed an invisible border. The world I had left behind suddenly seemed far away.

He dropped me at a youth club called Parallax, where the lights were still on. Inside, three men sat at the bar, passing joints between them. The sweet smell of hash hung in the room. From the speakers came the long, hypnotic strains of David Bowie's *Station to Station*.

I asked how long they would be open, but this was the last round; they were closing up. So I went on my way again. The adrenaline from the fight at home and my reckless decision to leave had worn off, and exhaustion set in.

I tried to sleep under the viaduct over the N34. With no blanket or sleeping bag, it wasn't easy – it was mid-March. But I didn't lie there long: soon the sky began to lighten. A new day was breaking. Sunday morning.

Heading South

I climbed onto the viaduct and walked towards Hardenberg. Not a car in sight. The endless white dashes in the centre of the asphalt stretched ahead, leading me on.

By chance, and without a plan, I had stepped into the wide world.

My thoughts drifted back to the night before. I was still seething. This time he would feel it: I wasn't going back. It felt like a mental arm-wrestle – I refused to give in. Yet with my resolve came doubt. A whisper: *perhaps you've gone too far*. I could still go home. But then what?

Nothing would change. Only the same endless cycle, my feelings forever on the chopping block. I was done with it. It had to end.

If I disappeared, perhaps he would regret the way he had treated me. That seemed the only way to bring him to his knees. Then we would see if he really cared.

The meadows on either side of the road were draped in white morning mist. Wisps of fog drifted silently across the empty carriageway. Here and there a farmhouse rose up, bare treetops poking above the veiled world. It was damp and cold. The clothes I wore were no protection. I had no clear destination, only the vague idea of going south.

The road began to stir. Now and then a car passed, usually from the opposite direction. Drivers and passengers turned their heads, watching me until I was out of sight. Their unspoken questions lingered in the air and left me steeped in melancholy. I asked myself what I was doing. Why couldn't I simply dissolve into the mist, vanish as if I had never existed?

Marker posts stood every hundred metres; I counted

them to track my progress. A green Opel Kadett slowed and stopped.

The driver opened the door and said, 'You're out early. Where to?'

'Hardenberg,' I replied.

'Good, I'm headed that way.'

He wore a grey overall and a cap over his bald head.

'Working on a Sunday,' I thought. 'He must be a farmer.'

He dropped me near the slip road to the N34, where I could continue hitchhiking.

I knew the Netherlands. Since childhood I had loved leafing through the Great Bos Atlas. I knew countries, rivers and capitals by heart. I could spend hours lost in maps, dreaming of the world beyond my village. On holidays to France I was always allowed to sit up front – I was the only one who could read the map.

The day turned warm and clear. The sun burned off the last of the mist; the sky was bright and blue. My journey went well. Via Almelo and Hengelo I found myself in the Achterhoek. I thought of the Lochem pop festival, where every year on Ascension Day we went with friends. With Uncle Henk driving the oldest bus of Lanting Travel Agency. Good enough for the pack of scamps we were. By nine in the morning we were already tumbling out, the worse for wear, often sleeping it off before we heard a single song.

'This must be somewhere around here,' I thought.

By afternoon it was nearly twenty degrees – unusually warm for March. A young man in a suit gave me a lift. On the back seat lay a wreath of flowers, filling the car with the unmistakable scent of a funeral. He was heading to Germany via Arnhem. That suited me. The sun and warmth lifted me. I no longer thought of home. I was on the road, and I wanted only to go further.

At the border a long queue stretched ahead. The radio announced that a prisoner had escaped, and every car was being checked – on both the German and the Dutch side. Police cars with blue lights lined the roadside. The driver said he was only going as far as Emmerich, just across the border.

'You could get out here, then keep hitchhiking.'

Why not? Germany was right there. At the checkpoint my passport was enough to let me through.

Giggling on the backseat

I stood for a while with my thumb out, but people apparently had no inclination to take anyone along. It was as if they themselves felt liberated now that they had left the border behind them. The tension gave way to a kind of languid weariness. The afternoon sun burned softly on my jacket. I wondered whether I was even standing in the right place, or whether I might be better off walking a bit.

Just as I was about to give up, a battered red estate car pulled over. The back door swung open.

Inside were a German lad and three girls. They beckoned me in. He and his girlfriend sat in front; the other two were in the back. The car smelled of patchouli and sweets.

Not long after we set off, to my astonishment the driver's right hand disappeared beneath the blouse of the girl beside him. She didn't seem to mind. With no bra and only a thin blouse tied just above her stomach, she left little to the imagination.

The girl next to me giggled at the scene. I didn't know where to look.

Were they teasing me? Was I expected to play along?

I turned away, lost for words.

Suddenly the girl said, ‘He’s shy, isn’t he.’

I felt myself redden.

“Shit,” I thought. “As if that wasn’t enough. Was I supposed to think this was normal?”

I was relieved when they finally let me out. Air. Out. Still, the image beneath that thin blouse wouldn’t leave my mind so easily.

A Night in Düsseldorf

Hunger set in; I hadn’t eaten properly all day. Now and then someone in a car had offered a sweet or a bit of chocolate, but that didn’t touch the emptiness. I braced myself and carried on. After a few short rides I finally caught a break: a lift from a lorry driver with a seven-and-a-half-tonner.

His name was Rudolf, a man in his forties. Solid build, curly blond hair, ruddy complexion, pale blue eyes. He seemed concerned about me. His fatherly tone and warmth put me at ease. He noticed I had no luggage and asked if everything was all right. I kept my guard up and, without looking at him, said there was no problem. He didn’t look convinced, but let it pass.

I had already prepared myself for situations like this. I didn’t want to be left speechless, afraid that people might become suspicious and alert the authorities. To avoid awkward questions, I had made up a story for myself. If people wanted to know where I was headed, I would say, “To Switzerland, to my father, who works there in a watch factory.” And to give it a bit more cachet, I would often add, “He designs watches.”

So when Rudolf asked where I was heading, I gave him the line.

'To Switzerland, to my father.'

'Then you've a long road ahead of you.'

I nodded. Silence stretched between us.

As evening fell, he offered me a bed for the night. I had been hoping for that. He took me to his home on the outskirts of Düsseldorf. He cooked us dinner, and I devoured it. He laughed.

'You haven't eaten in a while, have you?'

'True,' I smiled.

Afterwards, sleep overtook me. I felt almost rude, but Rudolf understood. He showed me to the guest room. As soon as my head touched the pillow, I was gone.

The next morning, after breakfast, he drove me to a slip road so I could carry on hitching. He shook my hand and wished me luck. I felt tears prick but held them back. I pretended I couldn't wait to see my father.

Lost on the Motorway

The sun came out and lifted my spirits. Rudolf had warned the weather would turn by evening, but for now it held.

It was Monday, and there was much heavier traffic. Not that hitchhiking necessarily went any better. At times I stood by the roadside for hours, waiting for someone to pick me up. Endless streams of cars, packed onto two- and four-lane roads, sped past me. Growling engines, fuming exhausts, fleeting glances that vanished behind gleaming windshields in the gentle spring sun.

I wasn't picky. Any lift would do. I didn't have a hitchhiking sign with a clear destination. I still didn't know where I wanted to go. I was hitchhiking more or less at random. My geographical knowledge also failed me here in Germany. I knew the major cities of the Ruhr area only by

name; where exactly they were located was a mystery to me.

After a scatter of rides I found myself in Belgium. I'd missed the crossing; apparently we'd just sailed over it. The road signs told the tale - they'd changed.

Past Liège I was dropped in the middle of the motorway. The driver told me it was a good place to hitch. It wasn't. Cars were moving too fast. I needed a slip road, but it might be miles away. Darkness fell. The cold bit. Wet snow began to sting my face. Rudolf had been right.

I trudged along the crash barrier over the gray asphalt with no end in sight. To shield my face from the thousands of snowflakes, I pulled up the collar of my jacket. I kept my head low, as low as I could. Meanwhile, cars roared past me incessantly. Now and then one would honk, apparently to signal that I was a hazard on the road. I stopped trying to hitch. It was hopeless.

A Night in the Cell

My mood collapsed. I felt wretched. I thought of home – warm, perhaps even waiting for me. The thought made me feel worse. I wanted to make my point. I had to keep going, no matter what.

As I was lost in these thoughts, suddenly blue lights flashed. A police car pulled over. Doors slammed. Two officers approached.

'It's forbidden to walk along the motorway,' one said.

The other shone a torch in my face. '*You're on drugs, aren't you?*'

I denied it, trying to look as clear-headed as possible. Long hours at the roadside had raised a rash around my mouth-exhaust fumes, I guessed. I probably looked worse

for wear. They asked for my papers and my address. I had to leave the motorway, they said.

'Where am I supposed to go?' I asked.

Beyond the barrier there was scrub with trees just beginning to bud. And beyond that? No idea. Open fields. They seemed uninterested in whatever consequences this might have for me and made it clear that it wasn't their problem. *Were they leaving me here to fend for myself? Was I supposed to figure it out on my own?* I protested. They were demanding the impossible of me, so they would have to come up with a solution as well.

I asked whether they could take me instead. In chorus: that wasn't how it worked. When I gave them the sad version of the Switzerland story, they wavered and finally gave in. They took me to the station. I could sleep in a cell. They locked the door. Not ideal—but it was the best I was going to get.

Months later I received a summons to appear in a Belgian court for vagrancy. I ignored it, and never heard another word.

The Greek Family

The next morning was glorious: sun, clear skies. I walked out of the village where the police station stood, thumb already out. A Greek family stopped – a father, mother, and a son and daughter of about ten.

Mikos, the father, waved me into the back with the children. I could just barely squeeze onto the rear seat, and I didn't really understand why he had bothered to stop. It was quite cramped. The children shuffled over silently, wide-eyed, and said nothing.

It soon became clear they were lost. They had a map, but

none of them could read it. After a while Mikos asked if I knew the way to Ghent.

We pulled into a parking area and he showed me the map. I saw that they were on the wrong route and tried to explain how we could get back in the right direction as quickly as possible. Mikos didn't quite understand. He said I should sit in the front and guide him. It felt awkward that the mother had to give up her seat for me, but it also felt like an honor that he trusted me. That felt good.

What I used to do for my own family on holiday, I was now doing for them. Soon we were back on course, and Mikos and his wife were delighted. They shared food, drinks and sweets with me.

Mikos was a cheerful man. Out of nowhere he would burst into Greek songs, which the children and his wife would then join in or hum along to more softly. On my part, I also made a modest contribution to the choir.

Mikos was so pleased that he suddenly shouted, "*I drive with you to America,*" slapped his hands on the steering wheel, and roared with laughter, and everyone laughed along.

We were having a good time together - until we had to stop for fuel.

Not Welcome

A line of cars snaked towards the pumps. When our turn finally came, the attendant refused to serve us. I wound down the window, baffled, and asked what the problem was. He simply pointed at the family in our car and flicked us away with a sour little gesture. And then I saw it: because they looked different, we weren't going to be sold petrol.

Outrageous. I went cold with anger; I'd never seen

anything like it. To turn away such gentle, decent people because some snot-nosed lad my own age had decided it. I wanted to launch myself at him, but Mikos caught my arm.

'Keep calm,' he murmured. 'Leave it.'

The quiet dignity with which he took the insult – to him and to those he loved – cut me even more deeply than the insult itself.

'How can you let this pass?' I thought. 'Something has to be done.'

I tried again to get out, and again Mikos held me back. He could see the fury burning in me. If he let me go, it wouldn't end well. My anger curdled into helplessness. In my head I'd floored that loudmouth a hundred times already – and yet I could do nothing.

'We'll find another station,' Mikos said, and drove away.

I still couldn't believe it. In a few short hours we'd grown close, laughed together; they felt like family. I wanted to shield them from this kind of injustice.

'I speak the language,' I thought. 'I could have made that little fool understand it was out of order.'

But Mikos was wise; this wasn't his first time. Take the path of least resistance. Don't stir trouble you don't need. We drove on in a silence heavy with disappointment.

Questions without answers filled the car. This was reality. Their reality. Try as I might, I couldn't comprehend it.

Another station turned up soon enough. This time we were up straightaway. I moved to head off trouble: as soon as we stopped, I got out, took the nozzle, and started pumping. A moment later, someone came up and told me it wasn't self-service. I apologised, said I hadn't noticed, and let him take over.

This attendant, at least, didn't seem bothered by the family. With a full tank we set off again, spirits slowly

returning. We began to laugh once more, though not so freely as before. That nasty little episode had left its mark.

The route to Ghent was no longer difficult; it was essentially a straight road. I had no desire to go there. The map showed Paris not overly far from here. It pulled at me like a magnet. I'd heard so much about it. That was where I wanted to go. I told Mikos and asked him to drop me at a turn-off for Paris. He could carry on toward Ghent. I climbed out; his wife slid back into the front. I waved until they were out of sight.

They stayed with me. A father who'd been proud of me. For a moment it felt like home. Perhaps it was an illusion, perhaps only shared needs had brought us together. But the respect they showed had a healing effect.

I was worth something after all.

Towards Paris

I caught a lift to the French border. On the far side there was a big lorry park—good odds for a long haul if I asked a driver. First, though, customs. I circled to see where I might slip through unseen. If I could pass unnoticed, I'd dodge the awkward questions.

There was only one way: a narrow path skirting the customs booths. It was busy, and at first no one seemed to clock me. Just as I thought I was through, an officer called me inside. He took my passport and peppered me with questions in French—too fast for me to follow.

Why was I travelling alone, and without luggage? I explained, as simply as I could, that I was going to Paris and from there by train to Switzerland. To my father.

He asked how much money I had. I showed him the 25-guilder note. I was fairly sure it wouldn't buy a train ticket.

He thought otherwise: he waved me on with a perfunctory *bon voyage*.

Half an hour later, in the lorry park, I'd spoken to a driver willing to take me part of the way. He dropped me at the Amiens turn-off. Soon after, a woman in her thirties stopped, opened the passenger door and beckoned me in.

I hesitated. Her eyes were black hollows in a pale face blotched with red. She looked unwell – or high. She was bound for Amiens and, quite unprompted, offered me a bed for the night. Tempting, yes. But something was off. Perhaps it was kindness and I was wrong to worry. In moments like that, though, you've only your instincts.

Mine said, '*don't*'.

I thanked her and said I'd rather go straight to Paris. There were still hours before dark. I had time.

After a long lift with a lorry and two short hops, I was set down beneath an arched bridge over the Seine, Paris glowing in the evening light.

Pigalle

I drifted, and found myself in a district packed with bars. Neon bled red, green, purple and yellow across the streets. Cars and taxis came and went. Pavements heaved with people. Hawkers – mostly African men – pressed watches, bracelets, necklaces and other trinkets at passers-by, who mostly strode on without a glance.

Clusters of transvestites loitered near a hotel, making play for the men who passed. I stood and watched. They could have been women: make-up, varnished nails, breasts, dresses, heels, long hair. Even their movements were feminine – more so, perhaps, than the women I knew. Slowly I

realized they were touting for clients, whisking them into the hotel for a quick pleasure.

I stayed put, curious. *What am I looking at? What do I feel?* However convincing the performance, to me they remained men.

Some caught my eye and made inviting gestures. It felt theatrical, a scene staged as much for me as for themselves – comic, almost weightless. As if they didn't take themselves entirely seriously, inviting me not to either.

I walked on. Sex shops and cafés followed one after another. Women in short skirts and bright lipstick stood in doorways, coaxing men inside. They undoubtedly had a price too, just like the women at the bar.

This was Pigalle, as I later came to understand—the nightlife district of Paris. An amusement park for adults. From time to time a woman stopped me, leaving nothing to doubt. The sheer volume of temptation put an edge of desire in me, yet I knew it counted for little. They wanted money, and I had none.

Little by little, amid the crowds and the commerce, I felt lost. No warmth. Everyone wanted something. Starting a conversation made no sense; they would only take me for part of the sex trade. And I had no French to speak of.

If I wanted a safe place to sleep, I had to get out. Doubt gnawed. What if I found nowhere? In this vast, indifferent city I was no one. A nobody. My thoughts darkened; the neon glare lost its charm. The city's sensual spell broke.

I left Pigalle. In a small park with a few trees and a pond I found a bench. It was calmer here. Broad streets and tall apartment blocks enclosed the little patch of green. Long rows of cars lined the kerb. Lights glowed in most of the flats; inside, people sat warm and safe. I thought of home—

then the image of my father rose, and the longing vanished at once.

Maurice

From time to time a few people passed by. I clung to them with my eyes, as if trying to pull them toward me. Silently, I screamed for help. I was also terribly hungry. A boy sauntered by a couple of times, watching me. I longed for human contact.

The third time, he sat down beside me. He seemed a little older than I was. He introduced himself as Maurice. Once it became clear that we couldn't understand each other very well, I quickly got to the point. A place to sleep. He understood and offered to help me. I could stay at his place. It was a bit of a walk from here, but I didn't mind. A weight lifted from me.

'Hungry?' he asked.

'Oui,' I said, nodding hard.

'Pas de problème.'

In a Wimpy Bar he bought me a hamburger and a portion of chips. It was kind, and I thought, *So it will all be fine. Paris isn't so bad after all.*

After eating my fill, I thanked him for his generosity and slipped the till receipt into my pocket. We took the metro and then a train. We didn't buy tickets anywhere and passed through without any trouble.

Remarkable, I thought. Is public transport free in Paris?

His flat was on the fourth floor in an old quarter. When we entered, his father sat in his vest on a tiny balcony, smoking. The two narrow doors to the lounge stood open. Father and son exchanged a few clipped words; I had the sense they weren't very fond of each other.

The father didn't so much as glance at me, staring instead at the passers-by ten metres below. Maurice showed me the double bed in the lounge. We'd share it. I didn't worry; I'd done the same with friends before.

I fell asleep at once – until a hand fumbled at my groin. I jolted awake. *Oh..... that was the intention.*

Calmly but firmly I told Maurice to stop at once or I would leave. He muttered an apology and withdrew his hand. His father still sat on the balcony, a few metres away, apparently unconcerned.

Despite my doubts and the tension in me, I was so tired I slipped back into sleep almost immediately. A little later it began again. This time I'd had enough. I got out of bed, dressed and left.

I was furious. Maurice tried to stop me. His father watched in silence from his perch. He'd promised, and still he did it. I couldn't trust him. It was over.

I longed for a warm bed, but I was back on the cold streets of that immense city.

After a long walk I reached the Champs-Élysées. It was quieter than Pigalle, perhaps because it was late. Inevitably I was drawn back to people. After all, they were the only ones who could help me.

Émile

A tramp asked me for money. I gestured that I had none and started to walk on.

He caught my arm and whispered, 'I have money.'

He led me to a quiet corner behind a building and showed me trouser pockets bulging with coins and notes.

'Come, let's have a drink,' he said, miming a glass to his mouth with his thumb.

'Je m'appelle Émile,' he added, and shook my hand.

There was something disarming about him. He meant well. No hidden strings. At last, someone who saw me. Not a client, not a child, not a stranger. Just a human being.

Or perhaps I wanted to believe that.

A neat row of little glass kiosks lined the promenade. We moved from bar to bar, drinking beer at the counter. He paid for everything.

In each place we had one beer, then moved on – a ritual of disappearing and reappearing, deeper into the night each time.

Émile loved people. He laughed at everything. His eyes hunted the margins: drunks, tourists, prostitutes, faded dandies, transvestites, women with false lashes.

He noticed my gawping. I was green, and it amused him.

Though we couldn't talk much, we laughed a lot. The constant parade of characters was an endless source of wonder. Humour was handed to us on a plate. One look of recognition and we were in stitches.

We did the whole row, and by the last kiosk Émile's pockets were almost empty. The beer had buoyed me, hiding my fatigue, but now it crashed over me; Émile was tired too.

He knew we'd find somewhere to sleep. On a wide street we tried the doors to stairwells in four- and five-storey blocks. To my surprise most were unlocked. He often slept in stairwells; at least they were a little warm.

We found a landing. Émile lay down and told me to lie beside him. After what had happened earlier that night I was wary, but nothing else about him had worried me. I lay down and tried to sleep on the hard, cold floor. It wasn't long before his hand was at my groin.

My body went rigid.

Again.

I was spent. Defeated.

My thoughts spun but my limbs wouldn't move. The knowledge that it was happening again – so quickly, so suddenly – knocked me sideways. In the dark, in a strange building's stairwell, next to a man I'd thought I could trust. It felt like a betrayal.

My throat tightened. No anger left, not even surprise. Only emptiness.

Was there no one who could simply be human? Without wanting something? Without that hand, that expectation?

That was when I broke.

Not loudly. Not with theatrics.

Quietly. Inside.

I stood up without a word and went down the stairs and out through the door. My legs moved of their own accord; my head was a knot of confusion. *I wanted to go home.*

The Return

The decision was made. I needed the quickest way out of the city. The Champs-Élysées seemed my best chance. Dawn was breaking; traffic had started to move. On a whim, I stuck out my thumb. After a while, a car actually pulled over. He asked where I was headed.

'North, to Belgium.'

'Get in. I'll put you on the route,' he said.

The tension of returning home drove off my tiredness. All I cared about was being dropped in the right place.

On the radio they played the Rolling Stones' *It's Only Rock 'n' Roll (But I Like It)* – in French. That sounded so funny.

'Pourquoi français?' I asked, pointing at the radio.

He laughed and explained they did it to protect the French language from too much English influence. Every English-language hit was translated into French and re-released. Only those versions were played on the radio.

He set me down neatly, and from there I could make my way north. *Home.*

Sleep-in

I hitched all day. Half the time I was dead weight to the drivers - sit down and I'd nod off.

Late afternoon, northern France, near the Belgian border: a Dutch lorry driver pulled over.

'Where to?'

'Drenthe,' I said.

He wasn't going that far, but he could drop me in Breda. There was a *sleep-in* - a cheap hostel - where I could spend the night for a few guilders. Music to my ears. I slept the rest of the way.

He woke me outside the sleep-in. They still had a bed. Twelve guilders - the first money I'd spent the entire trip. I was so glad to see a mattress I crashed at once.

I didn't surface until midday. The dorm was a forest of bunks. On one of them two lads were passing a joint. One offered me a drag; I declined. I'd never smoked weed or hash and had no idea how it would hit me.

They said they roamed the Netherlands for concerts and music events, sleeping in places like this. In every city they knew the cheapest bunks. Both were on benefits, with a postal address somewhere. Once a month they dutifully handed in their form at the benefits office.

'You could live like that,' I thought.

While I slept, one of them had gone shopping. A big bag

bulging with groceries sat on the bed. They weren't stingy; they waved me in for a hearty, almost Burgundian breakfast.

Heading home felt right. I was done. Empty. There was nothing left in the tank. I thought I was starting a new life, but what I really wanted was to be seen. Now I'd have to find out what came next - whether anything had changed.

I didn't get back on the road until the afternoon. First I had to trudge kilometres to reach the slip roads. It ate up time; by day's end I'd got no further than Nijmegen. There was a sleep-in there too, same price as Breda. It fit my budget exactly; one guilder left.

Next morning I set off early and by late afternoon I finally reached home ground. I was dropped on the road from Nieuw-Amsterdam to Erica, at the Dikke Wijk junction. A few more kilometres and I'd be home.

I'd worked out that, if my friends asked where I'd been, I'd say I'd been ill. Seemed plausible. I set off towards Erica.

I'd barely got going when a car stopped. A woman I barely knew opened the door and called, '*I'm so glad you're back.*' =

So much for the plan: the illness story, the pretence nothing had happened - finished. If she knew, the whole village probably knew. What on earth had happened?

Home

She set me down at our front door.

My mother was over the moon. She threw her arms round me and cried with relief. She'd always put me on a pedestal - perhaps too much. Loving, sympathetic, sometimes suffocating. Where my father kept his distance, she was forever on my skin. And yet, in that moment, her embrace truly felt like coming home.

My father stood in the room, furious. In his view, I needed punishment. First thing out of his mouth: 'You're going to a reformatory.'

I said nothing and thought: *You were the one who told me to go.*

The Search

At first my father hadn't worried about my disappearance. I'd spent nights outside before when I couldn't bear home any longer - under the awning of the funeral hall behind our house, back again in the morning. But when I stayed away for days, the machine kicked in.

He phoned my friends; nobody knew anything. After a few days the police got involved. Interpol was contacted for an international alert. They moved fast, even tracking down a holiday girlfriend from the previous year at a campsite in France: Brigitte, from the east of the country. She, of course, knew nothing either.

The news spread like wildfire through the village. Everyone was talking about it, and there was great concern.

That evening, my friends were called over. Not long after, the room was full and there was an almost festive atmosphere. It was then that I learned what had happened during those days.

Proudly, they told me they had been searching for me for nearly a week, in every place I might have been. Some had even been excused from school. It felt like a matter of life and death.

They had swept the whole area around Erica - fields and farm canals included. Every old barn and every shed where farmers kept hay and straw had been searched. I was aston-

ished - and shaken - by what it had stirred up. I'd never have imagined it.

When I said where I'd been, they didn't believe me.

'Sure, you can claim you were in Paris. Prove it,' they said.

I still had a Wimpy Bar receipt from Paris. I showed it to them. They wavered, but stayed sceptical.

'There are Wimpy Bars everywhere,' someone said.

I held up the receipt again and pointed to the total in French francs and the Paris address.

'You could have found that somewhere. Says nothing.'

I thought: 'Leave it. You can't argue this down.'

Beer appeared - the return of the 'prodigal son' had to be marked. Then came the questions. I told my stories. My father eventually dropped the reformatory idea, but nothing in our strained relationship changed.

And then came the moped.

Moped

Before long the family had its own explanation for my disappearance: *I'd run away because I hadn't got a moped.*

It cut deep, because it shrank everything to something petty. As if it were about a toy. As if you step out of your safe world - hitch to Paris - because you don't own a two-wheeler.

That was the problem: they didn't look at what was *really going on*; they preferred a story that suited them. No questions. No attempt to understand. Only assumptions and gossip, an easy narrative spreading through the family like an oil slick.

In the end I got one anyway - a second-hand Kreidler.

The neighbour across the road, who worked at a cycle shop, fixed a good deal for my father.

I was, of course, pleased with it. But it grated that they thought I'd finally got my way - as if I'd forced it.

Among friends my act of rebellion earned respect. In the family I was a spoilt child throwing his weight around.

And perhaps that was the sorest point of all: *no one truly saw why I left.*

The Psychologist

The headmaster sent for me. Why had I been absent for a week?

I told him the truth: I'd run away after a row with my father.

He regarded me for a while - no rebuke, no punishment - just a suggestion:

'Perhaps it would help to talk to a psychologist. Would you be open to that?'

I nodded. *At last, someone who might understand, I thought. Finally room to say what really matters. What it's like when you barely seem to exist at home.*

I sat in a grey chair opposite her at a table. A woman of about forty. Neat, correct, not unfriendly, but distant. A file lay open before her.

What do they actually know about me?

She met my eyes and said:

'I've heard you were away for a week. Can you tell me where you were?'

A flicker of pride rose. Not swagger, exactly - more the urge to prove it wasn't a story.

'In Paris,' I said.

She didn't nod. She didn't write.

'Paris?' she repeated, cooler now.

'Are you sure you're being honest with me?'

What? Did she think I was lying?

'Yes,' I said. 'I really was in Paris.'

She asked again, her tone needling me.

'Why would you go to Paris? Alone, at sixteen? That doesn't sound very believable.'

Why does *where* matter? Can't you see what matters?
Can't you see what I'm trying to say?

I said it again: I'd hitchhiked - Germany, Belgium, and finally Paris.

She sighed and put down her pen.

'I can't have this conversation if you're not prepared to be honest.'

Then she stood, gathered her papers, and walked out without a word.

I sat there, stunned.

What had I done wrong? Was it the swagger in the answer? Because I'd done what others wouldn't? Or my pride, hoping she'd see the anxious teenager beneath it?

She was meant to understand.

This was when I wanted to lay it all out. Everything.

And now I was back to being the awkward kid who spins yarns. A liar, even.

She didn't see me at all.

A chance missed.

Local Hero

All at once I was the talk of the village, especially among the young. I was the hero of the hour. But the attention had a downside. When people praised me, I lapped it up.

Part of me wanted to be adored; I went looking for proof

that I was special. Slippery ground. I started playing the part they saw. At first it worked - more attention from my peers, a surge of confidence.

Then the attention dried up, but the persona stuck. I drifted into a fantasy where fact and fiction bled together. Doubt crept in - about myself, about how they saw me. Was I still the 'hero', or had that image already gone? Sometimes I overplayed my hand out of bravado; sometimes I took blows - to mind and body - because I'd misread the moment yet again.

School and Authority

Little changed at home. My father and I wouldn't yield, and the tension held. We avoided each other; a single wrong look could set it off.

School was no refuge. My motivation had gone years earlier. It was a grind to keep going. Having to be there every day, sitting through dreary lessons, doing homework I never did - I learned nothing. I couldn't see the point. The pressure of tests I never revised for, the certainty I'd make a hash of them. Nightmares.

They said it was 'for my future'. I didn't buy it. I wasn't living for a future - I'd decide that for myself. Even so, apathy had me on the brink of repeating third-year HAVO for the second time.

The principal advised me to go to the Secondary Technical School (MTS); otherwise, I would be expelled. I was supposed to get more practical work there. Not true - four hours of practical a week, the same as HAVO. They simply wanted rid of me.

I struggled with authority. Parents, school, church - they all claimed to know best. What I felt didn't count.

They called it well-meaning; I felt it as pressure. No love - just 'fit in'. And if you didn't, you were trouble.

I lasted a year and a half at MTS. In a chemistry exam I wrote only my name, walked out, and never went back. School was finished for me.

My father said: '*If you won't go to school, then go to work. I don't want you under my feet here all day.*'

I took a full-time job at the rose nursery where I already worked weekends. After six months I got a job in a metal factory. Shortly after that I was called up for military service and left home - a relief for the family and for me.

NEW LIFE

DETACHMENT AND THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

Alone to Reading

When I finished my military service, my old employer was required to take me back - then fired me on the spot with a month's notice. They didn't want me. Fine. I wanted only one thing: out. My future wasn't there anyway. In a month I'd be free, and I was itching to go - shake off the familiar and try something new.

It was summer. Two friends and I had planned a late-August run to the three-day Reading rock festival in England. Days before we were due to leave, they both bailed. That stung. I'd been looking forward to it, and now it was just me. I hesitated - should I still go? Then I thought: so what. I'll go on my own.

I stuck out my thumb. Near Utrecht the police shooed me off the motorway, so I grabbed the train to Hoek van Holland and the night ferry to Harwich. Reading is west of London. I walked out of Harwich and started hitching towards the capital. What I had forgotten was that in England they drive on the left. With my thumb out and full

of good spirits, I walked along the road. When the cars passed me in the opposite direction, it dawned on me. I was standing on the wrong side.

Rides came fairly easily, and for the first time I had to use my English. Tough going at first: fast talk, different accents - I often had no idea what to answer. My last lift was from a young guy I could mostly follow. He raved about London: a world of its own, endless things to do. You could buy a listings booklet with every concert, film, theatre show and gig in town - every day a buffet of options. That spoke to me. He dropped me at a London station; from there I took the train to Reading. Gorgeous day, about 25 °C. I felt on top of the world. By the time I arrived, the first band was already on.

Reading Rock Festival

Ian Gillan - Deep Purple's former singer - was playing, and he was the main reason I'd come. Deep Purple had split; he was fronting the Ian Gillan Band. Wishbone Ash - another favourite - were on the bill too. Most of the other names were unknown to me, but that didn't matter. I'd done plenty of festivals - Pinkpop, Torhout-Werchter, Lochem. It was mainly about the company. But this was the first time I was going alone, and I didn't know how it would turn out.

I found a spot somewhere, listened to the music, and watched the people around me.

Guys in beat-up jeans and leather jackets; girls with dyed hair and safety pins through their lobes. Everywhere smelled of weed and chip fat. Long-haired rockers with bare chests lay in clumps on the grass; plenty of women were topless among them. Scottish, English and Welsh flags snapped above the crowd.

Body painters invited passersby to undergo a colorful transformation. Painted faces and bodies swayed in a trance to the beat. There was laughter, screaming, jumping.

Along the edge stood beer tents and food stalls - burgers, falafel - cheap T-shirts, bootleg cassettes, jewellery, alt clothes. In the back, under a tree, a knot of skinheads kept apart: shaved heads, hard stares, beer bottles gripped tight.

Down front the crowd churned. Rockers, metalheads, hippies - everybody cut loose. Pogoing, shoving, slam-dancing. Bass like hammers to the chest. Guitars screaming, singers tearing their lungs out under the hot lights. The crowd roared back, flung beer, shoved towards the stage.

Vendors with coolers shouldered through. Now and then someone hissed 'hashish' as they passed. Men in white, Indian-style robes tried to launch spiritual chats with anyone who'd listen. There was plenty of drinking - the sort of thing I'd have done with friends. Alone, I wasn't much in the mood.

I never quite joined the pack. Without a crew I felt like an outsider. I watched from a step back - even for the bands I'd come to see. Still, I made the most of it. The weather was perfect, the mood easy. If a set didn't grab me, I drifted to the stalls for a beer or a burger. There was plenty to take in off-site, too.

After dark, when the music ended, I'd wander the campsite. Among tents, vans and campers the party rolled on until people dropped. It was familiar - and yet everything here felt just that bit wilder, rougher, than back home.

All Gone

In the end, being alone was fine. It even felt freeing: no

tribe, no ties, just anonymity. I could watch everything in my own time and let my thoughts wander.

I slept in a large communal tent beside the festival site, set up for attendees. By day I left my pack - sleeping bag and all - there. Hauling it around was a slog, and plenty of others left theirs too. Seemed safe - until the final day.

People were streaming out. Long columns of backpackers and flapping flags filed off the field. The grass had vanished. What was left was a baked-dry plain strewn with plastic cups, empty cans, cigarette ends, shredded tents and torn sleeping bags. Thin threads of smoke rose from smouldering fires.

I headed to the tent to grab my gear.

My bag was gone.

I checked again. And again. Nothing.

My heart kicked.

Everything - gone?

Sleeping bag, clothes - just gone? It couldn't be.

I searched for ages - on-site, off-site, all through Reading. No luck. There was a police booth at the festival; eventually I filed a report. The officer said if the bag turned up they'd ship it to the Netherlands. Not much help right then. Evening had fallen and the air had turned cold. I had only trousers, shoes and a leather jacket - luckily my cash and passport were on me. Now I had to find somewhere to sleep.

To settle down I wandered back into town. I caught myself studying the houses. They weren't like home: different rooflines, hardly any bargeboards; redder brick; small windows; low stone walls around the gardens. This was definitely another country.

Baghwan and a small package being unwrapped

On the way I passed clusters of people. Some threw up a hand and hollered something my way - well drunk. Then a girl approached with a stack of forms for some campaign. Would I help out?

'Sure,' I said, 'if you can do something for me too.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, startled.

'I need a place to sleep. Maybe you could help?'

I explained I'd been robbed and didn't expect to see my stuff again.

'I'll ask a friend,' she said. 'Sign my form while I check?'

It was a hunger drive for the developing world - I was fine with that.

She came back beaming: her friend had a spare bed. Relief - I was sorted, for tonight at least. The three of us set off to his place.

They were followers of Bhagwan. They'd been to India and were swept up by his teaching. The hunger project, they said, was part of their movement. I knew little about him - just the headlines: 365 Rolls-Royces, free love, and the idea that spiritual growth begins once material worries are out of the way. His work for the poor I didn't know about.

They'd met him, and to them he was a kind of messiah. Their summary: let go of the ego and you make room for who you really are.

'The wrapping has to come off before you can open the gift,' the friend said.

'Nice image,' I replied.

I'd just lost everything, yet their calm certainty gave me something to hold on to. We chatted a bit longer, turned in

early, and in the morning said our goodbyes. I thanked them for the warmth and the bed.

On the walk to the station my mind spun with options. Berlin first crossed my mind; I dropped it. I could have gone home - swallow the loss, replace my kit, regroup. But something balked. Maybe stubbornness, maybe not. Going back felt like quitting, like drawing a line under something unfinished. I didn't want to trail home just yet. A tug towards adventure took hold. England pulled. London was close. Maybe I could find work there. I could always head home later.

A Fresh Start in London

I walked into the first temp agency I saw. It was about one in the afternoon. A man behind the desk looked up.

'What do you want?'

'A job,' I said.

'Sorted. Leave your name and address and call me back around five.'

I explained I didn't have an address.

'Use this office for now.'

'That was painless,' I thought.

At five I called back - and sure enough, there was a job: dishwasher at a brewery. Jackpot. I could start the next day at three. I told him I was near the agency and would swing by for the address. Fine. He handed me a Tube map as well. Walking back out into the street it hit me: I was going to stay. I had work. London suddenly felt like my city. I was over the moon and breathed in the atmosphere of my new home with full lungs. She lay at my feet. I wanted to explore her.

The Woman from Rotterdam

A woman at the brewery spoke Dutch. She was from Rotterdam originally and had lived in London for years with her English husband. She told me how she'd landed here - love, of course. Years ago. A sigh and a brief pause hinted that life since then hadn't always been easy. She was delighted to speak Dutch again and stuck close to me. On smoke breaks we stood outside while she unspooled her family history, bit by bit.

She had three children; one had become addicted to drugs. She rarely saw him now. He drifted through London, here today, gone tomorrow. Sometimes he'd show up to ask for money. She usually gave him some, knowing full well he'd likely spend it straight away on drugs.

'You can't do anything,' she said. 'The stuff is too strong - nothing cures it. They have to want it themselves. You can't force someone to stop.'

It sounded horrific: watching your child go under and being powerless.

'All you can do is wait - and hope he doesn't die,' she said, drawing deep on her cigarette.

'We tried everything. My husband tracked him down multiple times to set up detox. Nothing worked. In the end he said, 'I'm done.' He was going under himself. This has been ten years now.'

I didn't ask how it had come to this. Not my place, and I didn't want to judge. Maybe things had gone wrong - but I didn't want to think the parents were part of it. I wasn't going to open that door. She was too kind.

To keep the rest of the family from being dragged down, she kept going - strong for the others. Thankfully, they

didn't have those problems. Her two daughters were married; she was already grandmother to four.

Her story stuck - a lesson in helplessness, and in how hope survives even when your leverage is gone.

Under the Neon Sky

After my shift, at nine, I headed back to the student centre where I'd slept the night before - for five pounds. Not a luxury I could keep up for long, not if I wanted to eat and have the odd beer. Everything was insanely expensive. Unlike the previous night - when I'd crashed instantly - I didn't feel like bed yet.

The city pulled like a magnet. Motion everywhere: taxis skimming the kerb, neon blinking over pubs, cinemas, sex clubs. Red fronts, brash signs, punk posters peeling away beside political slogans. The smell of curry and chips with vinegar from food stalls mixed with the diesel breath of double-deckers.

Buskers worked the crowds; a sax player looped a jazzy riff by the Tube. Pubs bulged at the seams - laughter and the clack of pint glasses.

Faces of every shade and stripe flowed past. The types, the looks. Rough sleepers curled along the kerb. Punks, blotto on the pavement. A panorama of souls jammed onto a narrow strip of city. Each with a story - and mine, now, among them.

At a pub I ordered a pint of lager - half a litre, no head. The English considered foam just air. Finding a quiet corner was tough - you could practically walk on people's heads. Still, the mood was easy; everyone knew it was packed and tried to give way where they could. I ended up at a standing table with some Americans: three guys and a girl.

Their clothes and manner gave them away - rich kids. I chatted with the girl and shared my first impressions of London. What fascinated me most was the sheer variety of people and races. That pressed a button.

'Races shouldn't mix,' she said flatly.

'Why not?'

'Like with like - that's when people are happiest.'

'But it's already happening,' I said.

'Look around. Better to accept it.' She nodded.

'Here, maybe. I wouldn't want to live like that.'

The guys weighed in, more mildly. Different races could share a neighbourhood, they said, provided people were educated and had good jobs.

The strict line they drew felt odd to me. We weren't raised that way.

At the same time I realised how natural mixing felt to me: living, meeting, crossing paths. Maybe because I was in the middle of it - a stranger in a strange city who, despite everything, felt taken in.

That's how London started for me. No plan, no gear, no idea where it would lead. But I had work, a bed for the night, and beyond that everything was open.

Squatting in Earl's Court

The first few days in London I was full of hope. Reality caught up fast. After a couple of nights at the student centre my cash was basically gone. I needed something else. Wandering the city, I drifted into Earl's Court. On a street of grand terraces I noticed a few stood empty - broken into. Doors kicked in, windows smashed, wreckage everywhere. In the basement of one house things were still more or less intact. The door was open, the windows were

still in. Surprisingly tidy, apart from some junk. A lucky break.

I cleaned the place. There was an old mattress against the wall; I dropped it on the floor. A curtain hanging by a single hook became my blanket. I pulled the door shut. No lock. Not that it would help - anyone could walk in through the house. For now, this would be home. After that, I'd figure it out.

The brewery job didn't last. The temp agent had warned me it was short-term and said he'd find me something better: nicer work, more hours. Sounded good. Two days later I started at a Toyota warehouse - a parts hub for the whole UK.

The catch: commuting. From Earl's Court to Chiswick on the Tube. Walking was out; too far. But I couldn't afford the fare. One ride and I was skint. Payday was Friday, weekly, and it was only Thursday. I needed a loan. My supervisor, Scott, and I hit it off straight away. I asked if he could spot me a bit. He didn't blink. I didn't know it yet, but he'd become a key figure in my London life.

Friday afternoon my wages landed. I decided to celebrate: a bottle of wine and a film. A nearby cinema was showing a documentary about Jimi Hendrix. I was keen. I bought the wine, tucked it under my 'blanket' back in the room, and headed out.

I'd been looking forward to it all day - finally something to enjoy. When I got back, the bottle was gone. I yanked the curtain aside - nothing. How? Had someone come in? Who would think to look under a ragged curtain? The disappointment hit hard. As I stood there stewing, I heard voices and music upstairs. That'll be them, I thought.

I'd already noticed people slipping into my room at night. They left me alone, so it hadn't felt threatening.

Mornings, I'd find fancy gear they'd stashed there - stereos, TVs, bottles of champagne. By the time I got home from work, it would all be gone again.

I stormed upstairs to the top floor, pushed open the door. Five blokes. I demanded to know if they'd nicked my wine - something I pretty much knew already. They laughed at my fire.

'Come on, sit down - plenty to drink.'

They were welcoming, shoving things my way: hash, booze, food - everything. My anger evaporated.

They were Scots, just out of prison. Barely free and already back at the old game.

'That stuff downstairs... yours, right?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Then why leave it there? If the police show up, they'll think I'm the thief.'

They couldn't be bothered to lug it up every time.

'We've found a good guard,' they said, laughing.

They didn't care about anything - and there was a certain charm in that. I hung around a while. It was warm; they'd even coaxed an old gas heater back to life.

Their blithe attitude was infectious, but I knew I didn't want to live in their world.

After a bit I felt increasingly uneasy. It wasn't safe. Doors open, anyone could walk in, trouble could start for no reason. Not that I owned much - everything I had fit in a plastic bag I carried everywhere. Now that I was earning, it was time to find something better.

My Song

Now and then I crashed at Scott's place near the warehouse. He was in his forties, from around Hull: kind, quick-witted,

sociable He kept an eye on me and nudged my taste, especially in music.

I wore a Jim Morrison button. Scott thought The Doors were rubbish. Old hat.

'Listen to what's current,' he said.

'Rock's yesterday. You're too young to live in the past.'

I bristled - how could he knock my hero? But bit by bit I loosened my grip on the old and opened up to new sounds.

I sank deeper into the nightlife. The choice was ridiculous - especially for music. Every day brought gigs: established names, raw newcomers, scenes you'd never stumble on outside London. This was the industry's beating heart. This was where it happened. Ambitious bands tried to break through in London and catch the eye of A&R managers and pop critics. As soon as something new appeared - a band or a style - everyone piled in. Media, labels, clubs, fans - they all wanted a piece. Record companies pushed their acts with showcase gigs around town; you either delivered or you were gone as fast as you arrived. Everyone chased the spotlight.

I was gripped by the *New Romantic* - synthesiser music. No screaming guitar solo's, but electronic rhythms and catchy melodies. "*New Life*" by Depeche Mode became my anthem. It stood for everything I was trying to do: break old patterns, widen my view, reinvent myself. It felt as if the song had been written for me. A new life, a new energy - perfect fit.

My look shifted too. I started caring about clothes, scoured the thrift shops, tried to stand out a bit. Even the hair had to go: the shoulder-length mop gave way to a neat, short cut. Full makeover.

That shift pulled me into new rooms. I hit gigs several nights a week. OMD (Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark)

floored me most - I saw them twice at the Hammersmith Odeon, peak moments. I also caught Depeche Mode, The Cure, A Flock of Seagulls, Duran Duran, Ultravox, Gary Numan, and more.

I often tried to blag my way in - and it often worked. Big crush at the box office, too few stewards; when a gap opened, I slipped through. But seated halls like the Hammersmith were another game: all-ticketed seating with ushers checking stubs and walking you to your row. I'd linger in the aisle, wait for the lights to go down, then scout for an empty seat. Even then you had to stay nimble - if the real ticket-holder turned up, I was out.

At weekends Scott and I often headed into town. He'd come to London as a kid himself, and now he wanted to show me the ropes. I was comfortable around him - almost a fatherly presence. Whatever came up, I could count on him.

We drifted through Notting Hill, Portobello Road, Camden Town and the like. He wanted me to feel London in my bones: its narrow lanes, markets, little shops. There wasn't a real centre here; it felt as if several towns had fused into one, each with its own character.

We did sport too - rugby league and hockey, Scott's favourites. And of course football: in a heaving Wembley we watched England beat Hungary 1–0. Once he even scored two tickets for a live taping of 'Top of the Pops'.

He nicknamed me "Klomps" - in his mind every Dutchman wears clogs. The day he asked me the Dutch word for them, the name stuck.

When I was on my own I liked taking long walks. The city was so enormous and varied; round every corner there was something new to discover. I often went to Hyde Park, close to Earl's Court - an oasis of green and calm. For a country boy it felt a bit like coming home.

I could wander for hours or stretch out in the grass - let the noise drain, let my mind slip its leash. Slowly the city stopped being scenery. London became my story.

I hadn't been in touch since I left, about six weeks earlier. To let my parents know I was alive, I sent a letter - told them my news and that I was doing fine in this new world.

Kangaroo Valley

Meanwhile, I'd been hunting for a different place to sleep. One street over from the townhouse was a hostel. They had a spare bed, but it was a shared room. Fine by me. The price was decent for London: £25 a week. I met the guys in my dorm. Every last one of them was Australian or from New Zealand. In fact, the whole hostel was wall-to-wall Aussies and Kiwis. People didn't call Earl's Court *Kangaroo Valley* for nothing. For many of them, England was the land of their ancestors - the old mother country they wanted to discover for themselves.

Breaking into that circle wasn't easy. They mostly stuck together and often acted like kids let loose in a big city - little respect, sometimes downright rude. The vibe could be rough. Thankfully there was one guy I clicked with; without him, I'd probably have bailed pretty quickly.

Cheesehead

On the shop floor my world was simpler: sort the incoming parts and slot them onto the right shelves. Pretty much everyone did the same.

After a while I kept hearing a shrill voice between the aisles: '*Kaaskop!*' It took me a moment to clock that it was

Dutch. Was someone calling me “cheesehead”? Who would even know that word - another Dutchman? Hard to imagine an Englishman would know it.

That went on for days before I caught him. Turned out to be Fred - a white South African. He laughed that it took me so long to twig. I barely knew him; didn’t even realise he was South African. He said he lived in Earl’s Court.

From then on I often grabbed a beer with him at the pub, usually with his mate Theo, who worked with us too.

The more I got to know him, the more it was obvious he’d had his share of hardship. One night he told me he’d served in the South African army and fought in several wars. In an extreme situation, he had even eaten human flesh.

‘Tastes sweet,’ he said.

It had marked him. Fred was tall and gaunt, middle-aged, with big brown eyes and a pockmarked face. He drank all day. At work he kept a little bottle in his pocket to get through the shift. His arms and legs were so thin you’d think they would break at the slightest bump. And yet he had a warm heart and treated me kindly. Sometimes he spoke Afrikaans to me and I answered in Dutch; we’d end up laughing at each other’s words and pronunciation.

We’d sometimes smoke a joint outside the pub. His weed - *Durban Poison*, straight from South Africa - was fierce. That stuff was so strong a single puff would knock me completely out.

Fred knew places where you could still drink after closing time. Not cafés, but living rooms. Once I was allowed to come along. I was curious. He introduced me to the residents, then I could take a seat somewhere. No music, no atmosphere - nothing that made it cosy. Middle-aged men

and women sat quietly drinking together. To me it was a bleak affair. After that one time, I was done with it.

When Closeness Gets Awkward

At work, rumours swirled that Scott was gay. I'd never noticed anything, and I stayed over at his place quite a bit. Then one evening he asked if I'd share his bed. I didn't get it - he'd never asked before - but the bed was big enough, so I went along. In the night I suddenly felt his hand on me. I jerked, pushed him away, and lay there tense. Thankfully, nothing more happened.

I brought it up the next day. He said he'd thought our colleague Tara was next to him. That didn't sound convincing, but I let it go. I didn't want this to ruin our friendship; he mattered too much to me. It wasn't the end of the world either. If he was gay, that didn't make him a different person. He was still the same good guy. I just stopped sharing his bed after that.

More Hope Than Love

I did long for women. Scott had a big circle of friends, and through him I met a girl I liked - Agnes. She lived in a gorgeous spot by a park; her room looked straight out onto green. She liked me too, just not quite enough. We hung out, and she let me stay over a couple of times on the condition I wouldn't try anything. I kept my word, hoping something might change. It didn't, and we drifted out of touch.

A Slap in Shepherd's Bush

London brimmed with opportunity - and with sharp contrasts. I kept running into other worlds, other cultures, other values. Not everything was uplifting or beautiful. Some encounters marked out my limits - and at times stretched them.

One night I was in a pub in Shepherd's Bush with a handful of other foreigners. I went up to the bar to order a round. While I waited, someone at the counter suddenly cuffed me round the ear. It didn't really hurt - he mostly clipped my shoulder - but it jolted me. He was a Black man, and the place was mostly Black.

I looked to the barman - nothing. His silence said I was on my own. I glanced back at my friends; they hadn't seen a thing. The man who hit me was clearly drunk - that explained a lot. I asked him, point-blank, what that was about. He shouted something vague about white people, as if I ought to feel guilty, then turned away. There wasn't much to do with it.

I just thought: *what is this even about?*

'Church' in Fulham

Not long after, I ran into something just as unappealing. Every Sunday morning a Fulham pub staged a strip show the hostel regulars jokingly called the 'church'. They went there as a little group every week.

My Australian mate went one time and invited me along. On a small stage before maybe fifty people, a young woman performed with dildos, bottles, fruit - whatever was to hand - showing off acrobatics that mostly demonstrated what her most intimate part could accommodate. The crowd loved it.

For me it was the opposite of erotic - no desire, just aversion. I struggled to watch. Once was more than enough.

A Room of My Own

I'd had it with the hostel - too noisy, too little sleep. I worked days; they had money from home and lived it up. There was a temporary way out. I'd met a Frenchman, Yves, who offered to rent me his room for a week, also in Earl's Court.

He was heading back to France for a bit. Thirty pounds and it was mine - the same as his own rent. It was a big, pleasant room on the ground floor, looking out onto the street: a large double bed against the back wall; a gas cooker, a fridge, a wardrobe, and a sink with running water. I took it.

For the first time I had my own room - a lock on the door and no one to tiptoe round. It felt like I finally had some control over my life in this city, even if only for a while.

Girl from Earls Court

After my failed romance with Agnes, I later met another girl - Sarah - in Earl's Court. I often saw her in the same little street - strikingly well dressed, walking with a confident stride and a gaze that didn't flinch at anything. At first I figured she was just hanging about, like so many others. Only later did I grasp what she was actually doing there.

She was sixteen, beautiful, and had run away from home. Unlike Agnes, who led a predictable life, Sarah moved - apparently carefree - through a hard world. She approached older men; they'd pick her up by car and later drop her at the same spot. She mostly worked evenings, pacing the same short loop so clients could find her easily.

Catching her for a chat took luck. Usually she was too

distracted by the traffic, always scanning for potential clients. Sometimes a window slid down and an older man leaned out to beckon.

She would hurry over, rest her elbows on the door, and switch on her allure - light touches on his arm and face, a measured rhythm in her hips and shoulders. With a sultry look and a honeyed voice, she drew him into her world - soft, reassuring, never pushy. The prelude began right there on the pavement.

I couldn't make sense of how she let these men use her. Something in me wanted to protect her, to take care of her. She must have been through a lot, I thought. Yet I never saw her sad or defeated. She was always upbeat, as if nothing cost her effort.

I liked her, but she was wild and self-reliant. She earned good money and lived her own life. She didn't need me. I told her I had my own room for a week. That caught her interest. She immediately suggested seeing her clients there, with me taking a cut.

'So you want me to be your *pimp* now, Sarah?' I asked.

'No, no,' she said, 'you can just earn some extra money.'

I hesitated. Part of me felt flattered - like I'd finally been handed a role in her world. Maybe then I could mean something to her. Maybe she'd even grow to like me.

At the same time, I felt resistance. What was I inviting with all those strangers in Yves's room? Who knew what might unfold. However strong the pull, realism won out. It didn't seem like a good idea, and I said no.

I felt the boundary in myself - a thin line between helping and being used, between closeness and losing integrity. Sarah did fine without me. I had to learn to be at peace with that.

Boris

Since I'd been living in Earl's Court, I kept passing a homeless man - Boris, a Polish guy - begging in the same spot. As the weather turned colder, I grew more concerned for him.

One evening, when it was pouring and he was trying to keep dry under a little awning by a doorway, I couldn't stand it any longer. I told him he could sleep at my place. He stared at me, incredulous. I didn't budge, and eventually he agreed.

I helped him up - his legs shook, every step an effort. He slung an arm over my shoulder and we trudged through the downpour to my room. Conversation was pointless. He mumbled; I couldn't make it out. I had no idea if he understood me.

Inside, I asked if he wanted food; he could wash his face and hands. He waved it off. He wanted sleep. That's when it hit me I hadn't thought this through. How were Boris and I going to handle one bed? I improvised: he could lie on one side, on top of the bedspread; I'd get between the sheets.

There were extra blankets in the wardrobe - he could take those. He nodded, lay down, and was out cold in seconds.

He ground his teeth in his sleep. I figured it would stop. It didn't. Through the night I kept waking to that grating sound. There he was, sleeping peacefully, while I lay wide awake.

What was I thinking? Why me, when thousands walked past him every day? He hadn't asked for help. Did I think I could save him - like Sarah? Part of me wished I'd left it alone. Compassion had driven me - but how far do you take it? Where's the line?

Next morning Yves showed up at the door - back a day

early. Seeing Boris, he wanted answers. I said I'd felt sorry for him in that weather and offered him a bed for the night. Yves was not pleased. "You don't bring vagrants home. Who knows what diseases they might carry," he snapped.

I felt flattened. My doubts were confirmed. It was a daft move. I couldn't fix this man's life. That was an illusion. I was only making trouble for myself and others. Maybe I kept trying to rescue what didn't want rescuing.

Boris caught the drift. With gestures he made it clear he'd leave straight away. It hurt to watch him feel unwelcome. Now I'd let them both down.

When he shuffled into the street, grabbing anything for support, I looked at Yves and saw him soften a little.

'It was well meant,' he said at last.

I promised myself that if I ever had a dog, I'd name him Boris.

The Limits of Empathy

This event affected me more deeply than I had expected. I realized that I had overlooked something fundamental: where I thought I was doing the right thing, I was doing the opposite. That confused me - more than I wanted to admit.

With my place gone, I fell back on the one constant - Scott. I told him what had happened and what was eating at me. I'd begun to see that in a city like this - so much brokenness, so much loneliness - you can lose yourself in other people's pain. I had to learn to keep some distance, to steady my feelings. Not out of coldness, but to stay whole.

Still, it felt like betrayal - a bow to the indifference I loathed. A slippery slope to a world where no one cares. A cold society where charity has evaporated.

Scott showed up for people too, but he put it differently:

'There's something more important than wanting to help,' he said. 'Respecting someone's freedom.'

Leave people their dignity, even if they look pitiable from the outside. It's their life, their responsibility, their choice. If someone asks for help, decide then. Until that point, it may just be projection - your need to be needed.'

'Sometimes,' he added, '*setting boundaries is the deepest respect - for them and for you.*'

That stuck. Everyone runs their own life. With that in mind, I tried to move on. It let me breathe.

Couchsurfing

After a few days with Scott, I drifted again - staying with colleagues when it worked out. For a while I had a bed in a men's shelter. Everything was temporary. Everything borrowed. My life fit in a bag; my nights in other people's kindness.

I tried renting a room a couple of times, but the upfront costs - to the landlord and the agency - amounted to almost a month's salary. I wasn't up for that, especially as I went out a lot and preferred to spend my money there.

'Something will turn up,' I thought.

Football Tournament in Ghent

Work in the warehouse rolled on. Outside the rushes it was mostly waiting around, tea in hand, and shifting the odd crate. Most lunchtimes a few of us ducked into the pub for a hot meal and a pint. Afterwards I'd sometimes be so sluggish I barely moved. I'd crawl onto a lower shelf, into a big box, for a quick kip. I wasn't the only one.

I did try something sporty once. We had a Moroccan

colleague, Abdoul - also a mate of Scott's. He played football in the park a couple of times a week with friends and a few of our lot. As a former player I asked to join. He was fine with it, but I couldn't match their level. It remained with that one time.

Then, out of nowhere, something cut through the grey routine: Toyota organised a football tournament in Ghent for all West European branches. A whole weekend of matches. We'd be representing England.

With roughly forty on the floor we weren't short of options. Besides Abdoul there were a handful of keen regulars from the park. He put a team together and I was in it. Scott took the coach's role. Logistics sorted: ferry, hotel, meals. Drinks on us.

On the ferry to Zeebrugge I fell into conversation with a group of Belgians. Travelling with English colleagues, they assumed I was British. They spoke English to me and Flemish to each other. I decided to tease them and said I could follow their Flemish. They didn't buy it, then started firing off lines for me to translate - which I did. They were so impressed they thought I had some special knack.

'You must be a real language whizz, eh,' one said.

I let them think so and quietly enjoyed having them on - until one of my colleagues announced I was Dutch. The mask slipped; I was left red-faced. Luckily, they took it well and laughed at how neatly they'd been had.

We played four games over two days, two thirty-minute halves each. The top points-getters met in Sunday's final. It was a cushy trip: good hotel, great food. Evenings we bar-hopped in Ghent's old centre. Barring a few exceptions, we headed back early for proper sleep - the lads were taking it seriously.

Being back on the continent felt odd. Different. Here, the

whole landmass stretched out before you; you felt plugged into Europe. In England I never felt that. The place stands apart. The strip of water had become a psychological gap in me too. I saw the world from an island, and now I was 'abroad'.

That feeling would vanish fast if I went home. It wasn't far. Tempting. I started to waver - what did I really want? What was I looking for in London? What was I looking for at home?

But I knew that if I went back now, I'd be giving up something I couldn't quite name - not just the adventure, but the work of loosening, searching, stumbling, starting again. Going home felt like slipping into an old skin that no longer fit.

So I stayed - with the team. Soon enough I'd be back on the island. This was my world now; this was how I wanted it.

Scott kept me on the bench throughout, and there I stayed. By the time we reached the final I hadn't played a minute. Not in the final either. I didn't push it - the others were simply better. But the joy was no less when we won and carried the cup back to London.

Dead Kennedys in Brixton

The Dead Kennedys were playing Brixton. I'd never really been into punk, but related bands like The Clash, The Stranglers, and Siouxsie and the Banshees - about whom Scott was completely ecstatic - I did like. Of the Dead Kennedys I knew only one song, and it sounded pretty decent. I decided to go. Some time earlier there had been race riots in Brixton, and Scott told me to give it a miss. I thought that was over the top. After all, they were behind us.

I got off the Tube way too early - about an hour to kill -

so I ducked into the first pub for a beer. Everyone inside was Black; I was the only white face. It was quiet, but the few people there didn't exactly warm to me when I walked in. I felt uneasy. The Shepherd's Bush episode was still vivid.

Normally I'd order a pint; this time I stuck to a half. I took a small table and kept my head down. Nothing happened, but the tension felt thick - or maybe that was just me, primed by Scott's stories. I felt vulnerable; with the half pint in front of me, I tried to remain as neutral a presence as possible.

Then someone down the way shouted over, asking what I was doing there. I said I was headed to a Dead Kennedys gig, killing time with a beer. He told me I had no business there and should clear off.

The barman - helpful, for once - told him to back off. They argued for a moment, then the customer let it go. Either way, it clearly wasn't my place. I finished fast, thanked the barman, and left. Only after a few minutes outside did I feel the tension slide off.

At the venue I realised I'd misread the time - they were already on. The place was rammed. First move: fight my way to the bar for a pint.

While I waited for my order, I took in the scene. It was wild. The whole room was pogoing, spitting in each other's faces as they went. The band joined in just as enthusiastically, spitting at the audience; the crowd loved it. Everywhere I looked, index and middle fingers were raised in the air. One heaving mass, with a strikingly high level of tolerance.

I wanted a vantage point and edged along the wall-there was still some space there. But about every half-metre someone asked for a sip of my beer. By the time I got where I wanted, my glass was almost empty.

'Right-sip it slow,' I thought.

No point battling back to the bar.

A sharp glue reek hung in the air. On stairs by the stage kids were huffing from plastic bags, filling and collapsing with each breath. So young and already set on self-destruction - I couldn't process it.

Boys and girls my age, or younger, apparently done caring for their lives. What had broken for them? What was going on in their heads? Which disappointments had they never shaken?

It hurt to see that sad little cluster. I thought of the Dutch woman from the brewery and her addicted son. Watching your child go under must be unbearable. I didn't belong here. The music didn't help: a slab of raw energy, a wall of noise - no melodic lines, no surprising harmonies. Mostly rage and frustration, like they wanted to knock over society in one blast. I didn't wait it out; I left at the break.

This wasn't a world I could - or wanted to - join. Not a "New Life", but a dead end.

It wasn't the rawness that put me off; it was the lack of direction. Plenty of anger, no hope. I was trying to grow, to break loose; here, destruction felt like the language of protest. Not my road.

Britain's Class System

I started to wonder whether that destructive youth energy didn't spring from something deeper - a society where your slot on the ladder is set long in advance. What hit me early on was how deeply class still runs through Britain. From a nation so proud of its Magna Carta, I'd expected otherwise.

The pecking order seemed endless: lower class, middle class, upper-middle, and finally the upper-upper tier.

Speech shifted with each rung - the higher you climbed, the tighter and more pinched the diction. It was as if accent and vocabulary worked like passwords that opened doors.

Pricey boarding schools and elite universities kept the walls intact - well beyond the reach of ordinary families. The knowledge you gained there - and, more importantly, the networks - circulated within the same higher circles.

Back home in the Netherlands, we're raised on the idea that people are fundamentally equal. Wealth is all right; putting on airs is not. Here, a slice of society struck me as sure of its own superiority - and behaving accordingly.

I watched that certainty play out in a pub. A well-heeled young man was drinking with friends when a waiter accidentally sluiced a pint down his sleeve. The glass shattered. The waiter apologised immediately and went for a towel.

Not good enough.

The young man launched into a tirade that froze the room. He snatched the towel, tossed it onto the floor, and smashed his own glass.

"Clean that one up too, you miserable servant," he snarled.

I was stunned. I had never seen someone so brazenly place himself above another person.

What floored me even more was the manager's response: he didn't step in. He offered the offender a conciliatory drink for the 'inconvenience,' as if status rendered him untouchable. For someone raised to believe no one is worth more than anyone else, it felt like a slap. It was as though the system itself licensed contempt.

If it had been up to me - and, I suspect, much of the room - that blowhard would have been shown the door so unceremoniously he'd never forget it.

The economy of dehumanization

The inequality I sensed on the street echoed in the media, where it wasn't just displayed but normalised. The tabloids were the worst offenders.

Papers like *The Sun*, *News of the World*, and the *Daily Mail* fed on scandal, anger, and sweeping simplifications. They peddled *outrage* rather than news; *enemies* rather than nuance. Their worldview was neat and portable: there is always a culprit - usually an outsider or someone at the bottom.

The Falklands coverage has stayed with me. When Argentina seized the islands - British territory thousands of kilometres from home - Britain sent a fleet and war loomed. You could also ask what Britain was doing off Argentina's shore.

The *tabs* didn't bother with that. "KILL THE ARGIES," screamed *The Sun*'s front page. No context, just hate. As if they were openly calling for the murder of an entire people.

Even Osvaldo Ardiles, Tottenham's Argentine midfielder, became a lightning rod - as if a footballer had anything to do with the conflict.

Moral boundaries didn't blur only in war reporting; it was glaring elsewhere too.

Another hallucinatory example of that ruthless economy of dehumanization was the betting surrounding the pope's dying. At the time, he was terminally ill. The bookmakers capitalized on it: you could place bets on how many days he had left to live. The odds were neatly published - complete with payout tables - as if it were a horse race.

Even by British standards, it crossed a line. Out of basic

decency - and to avoid needlessly straining relations with the Vatican - the government eventually banned those bets.

Leaving

Bit by bit, the thought ripened: do something completely different. I'd heard you could make good money on the oil rigs off the Scottish coast. That appealed to me.

I was ready for something new. Days at work had gone flat - clock in, sit it out, clock out. The job no longer satisfied me, and the life wrapped around it was losing its shine. On top of that, I still didn't have a place of my own; I was sleeping somewhere different every time. That dependence began to grate. Maybe I wasn't trying hard enough - or maybe, somewhere underneath, I could already feel the end drawing near. Either way, hunting for a room felt less and less worthwhile.

That I'd managed to get by in this city gave me the confidence I'd find my way elsewhere too. There was no reason to fear the next step.

I told Scott what I had in mind. He nodded.

'Just go - live your dream.'

ENDLESS SEA

LIVING A DREAM UNTIL IT SNAPS

Fortune-Hunters

I was on the move again, hitchhiking out of London. Early December. Rain and a hard wind. I'd saved enough to get through the first couple of weeks and figured I'd land a job in the oil game by then.

First stop: Birmingham. Then a lift all the way to Lancaster. At a service station a trucker picked me up on his way to Carlisle. We got on, and he even treated me to a couple of pints. That night he let me sleep in the cab while he took a hotel room. In the morning he dropped me in Edinburgh. From there I thumbed it through Perth and Dundee, and at last rolled into Aberdeen.

A low, heavy sky pressed on the city, a fine rain falling. The cheapest bed was at the youth hostel. After asking around I learnt I just had to follow Union Street - the main artery - and I'd run into it.

On either side stood stout granite buildings. Grey as the weather, but so sure of themselves - almost as if they were saying: No one's bringing us down; we're here for good.

Maybe I was projecting, but did I see something of the Scottish mentality reflected in those buildings? It wouldn't have surprised me.

After a long walk I reached the hostel - another block of granite. They put me in a dorm with about twenty bunks, only a quarter taken. I didn't know yet that this place - and the people in it - would shape my life for the coming months.

Fresh from check-in, I headed to the kitchen to make tea. In the corner a guy with shoulder-length red hair was smoking. He looked up and brought over two steaming mugs, as if he'd read my mind. I sat on a wobbly bench.

'Neil,' he said. New Zealander. Lately living in Berlin.

'Just got in?'

I nodded.

'About an hour. Hitched up from London.'

He handed me a mug.

'Warm your hands. Colder than the south, eh?'

'Thanks. Scotland greets you with rain and a headwind.'

He grinned.

'Welcome to Aberdeen. The city where dreams die... and you end up staying anyway.'

He sat beside me. He smelt of diesel and tobacco - not unpleasant.

'Here for the oil?'

I nodded.

'They say there's plenty of work.'

'They've said that for years. Too many men, not enough jobs. Especially for our sort.'

He reckoned there were fifteen *contractors* nearby, and the trick was to show up every day.

'Prove you're not soft. Sometimes that tips it.'

He'd been at it two months, twice nearly got on, but lacked experience.

'And you keep at it?' I asked.

'What else would I do? Go back? To what?'

Silence for a beat. Rain tapping on the window.

'Do your rounds tomorrow,' he said.

'I'll mark the best addresses. No promises - saves your feet.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously. We're all in the same boat.'

He winked and stood. I stayed with the hot mug between my hands. Outside: grey, wet, still. Inside a slow realisation: this might get heavy.

What had I started? My heart sank. Was coming here a good idea? Looked like I'd joined a long line of treasure-hunters. Prospects, at best, were thin. Neil: two months, no dice. He wasn't the only one.

The hostel was a mix of Australians, South Africans, Canadians, New Zealanders - everyone chasing the same prize: a platform job and big pay.

Their stories matched: every day to the industrial estate where the contractors were - the firms hiring hands for offshore work. Everyone had a route, a shortlist he trusted. According to them it was all about staying power. That's how you showed you really wanted it.

The Daily Circuit

There was only one way to play it: if I wanted work, I had to join the grind. Otherwise I had no business being here.

With Neil's list I hit as many contractors as I could at first. Over time I learnt where I might get a look-in and where I wouldn't. The better bets were the overseas firms -

American and Canadian. European companies mostly hired from home. They paid better too and threw in benefits. The Americans and Canadians didn't. I wasn't fussed; the wages would be fine anyway. In the end I whittled it down to five firms that felt most promising.

Christmas, Broke

Most mornings I did the loop. Same walk. Same reception desks. Same 'no'. Weeks of that. Life went on, and my money thinned out. As Christmas neared I had to tell the hostel manager I couldn't cover my bed anymore. I asked if I could work it off somehow. We got along, so I dared to ask. He was a modern sort - his kids called him by his first name - and he found me odd jobs: garden work, clearing junk. I could stay, but it didn't put cash in my pocket.

Christmas came. While others were preparing for warmth, family, and abundance, I was broke in a strange city, in a dormitory full of strangers. The only decoration was a paper garland at reception.

On Christmas Day the manager brought me a plate from his own table: a generous heap - potatoes, stuffed turkey, cranberry sauce.

'Here you go, lad. You need something hot today.'

A small gesture, and it put a lump in my throat. First real food in days - not tin and salt and water, but cooked with care.

For a moment there was warmth - human dignity. Then the plate was empty and reality returned. Next day: *porridge*. Only *porridge*. Oats, water, a pinch of salt - the cheapest there is. And that's how it stayed for a while.

Other Plans

With things dragging there, I started looking for work elsewhere. Simon - another chancer - floated Iceland: a job at the fish auction, good money. The snag was we had no cash to get there.

He was a few years older: tall, blond, South African; confident, with a striking pull on women. We hunted for alternatives and came up empty. We nearly landed logging work in the Scottish Highlands, but the man who was to hire us couldn't get his contracts through with the Scottish forestry authority in time. So we scraped by, and I kept up my daily circuit of the contractors.

Solidarity

In all that bleakness, something warm appeared: mutual aid. We each fought our own corner, but we wanted the others to catch a break too. Our little band made a pact: whoever landed a job would share his last cash with the rest.

There were about seven of us. Not close friends, but comrades of circumstance. Our pact was simple: to persevere - every single day. Now and then someone struck lucky and a dream came true. Whoever did kept the bargain.

Anyone who had a bit of money left would split it with their mates. It was never much, but often enough to keep me going for a few days-or, with a bit of luck, a full week. That gave me sometimes a bit of breathing space.

Psychedelic Mushrooms

Bit by bit I learnt the city - its side streets and squares, the pubs, the places where young people drifted together. The area around Union Street and Union Terrace Gardens was one of those spots where something was usually happening.

On a wet afternoon near Union Terrace Gardens I met Jim - local lad, early twenties like me, heart of music, head of lyrics. We clicked instantly. He became my sherpa through town. We spent hours talking bands. He had this habit of dropping lines that nailed the moment. When we were stuck waiting for a bus, he'd sing, '*Here I am sitting at a bus stop, wish I was somewhere else,*' and then, dead serious: 'It's so true, it's so true.'

He loved a flutter as well. Any spare change went on the horses. I often tagged along and hoped he'd land a win. Mostly he didn't - except once, when he hit big: over six hundred quid. But he wanted more. Little by little he blew the lot that very afternoon.

Jim knew where to find *liberty caps* - hallucinogenic mushrooms. I'd love to give that a try sometime. As a kid I'd read a lot about mind-expanding substances; they fascinated me. I'd figured out which drugs were more and less addictive. These mushrooms sat at the low-risk end, so I felt safe enough to give it a go.

They were supposed to grow in a field near the hostel. We went to check and, sure enough, small mushrooms everywhere. Jim showed me exactly which to pick. After a while we'd filled a decent bag. He swore by an omelette - best way to take them. The hostel kitchen would do, and someone would surely have eggs to spare. We chopped them, gave them a quick toast in the pan, whisked a few eggs

and poured them over. When we'd polished off our magic meal, I felt nothing.

'Give it time,' Jim said.

To bridge the wait, we headed to the basement for a game of table tennis. Half an hour in I started seeing faint lines, joining into a lion's head.

"I think it's kicking in," I told Jim, my voice bright with anticipation.

More shapes, more points of light. It felt like a transparent film had settled over the world, see-through, yet the real thing was still there. A warm, heady bliss rolled over me: the kind of joy you normally feel in a flash, now stretched out as if it might never end. The basement closed in; I went outside.

It was cold and drizzling, but I didn't mind. Everything looked wonderful, and I headed into town with a wide grin. I felt nothing but warmth, letting my feet take me down Union Street toward the centre. The visions kept rolling in - odd patterns, those recurring pinpricks of light. The world - and my life - felt like pure, unbroken bliss.

After a bit I became aware of the others around me - hunched shapes, collars up against the rain. Gloomy looks. Ladies with umbrellas tiptoed past in a hurry. Suddenly I felt exposed - there I was, cheerful and loose. *People would notice*, I thought, and panic nipped at me. I'd forgotten my coat - just a cardigan and a T-shirt. What if someone thought *I was unhinged*? What if they called the police?

I decided to blend in. Head down, shoulders lowered, my stride turned firmer, more purposeful. The joy ebbed. This was pure survival. One direction only: forward. I tried to cap the visuals. I wanted to be normal again, like everyone else. But the glow and the images wouldn't be banished. An inner tug-of-war started. The paranoia struck.

Any moment a hand could land on my shoulder and I'd be hauled off. Unbearable. It felt like the whole world was staring. I had to get out.

I passed a cinema - huge poster for *Fantasia*. Perfect bolt-hole. The film had just started. I slipped inside and found a seat. It was dark; no one could see me. The pressure eased, and slowly I came back to myself.

I'd assumed that on a psychedelic I'd love a cartoon even more. The reverse happened. The images flickered past somewhere in the distance without any coherent pattern. I couldn't make head nor tail of it. I watched the whole film, but it was no more than a vague, incoherent dream of which nothing remained.

Outside, the trip had passed. I was relieved, but also a little disappointed that what had begun so beautifully ended like that.

Jim and I tried again a few days later, roughly the same dose. The effect was much weaker, and the charm had gone for me.

But these psychedelic excursions did nothing to change the grim reality. The youth hostel was about to close its doors. In mid-January it would shut for six weeks. I'd be on the street.

Hostel

I needed another place to stay. Without income that was rough. Winter bit; Scotland felt colder by the day. I lived one day at a time, with no real prospect. The thought of going home kept sidling up.

Some days I felt wretched and alone, wondering why I was still here. What was I trying to prove? I didn't have to

endure this: the cold, the insecurity, the constant knock-backs. The endless waiting for something that didn't come.

But whenever I pictured home, I saw my father's face: '*I've always said that nothing would come of you.*'

I didn't want to give him that satisfaction. I'd sooner die in the gutter here than crawl back home.

So I kept going. Simon was in the same fix. No place to stay. We found a hostel at twenty pounds a week: like London's, only dirtier. Men only, many of them deep in drink.

We ended up in a grim little room we had to share. For a few days it was just us, then a man of about fifty moved in - Oscar. At first he was very modest. I felt for him a bit. He seemed vulnerable, unsure, as if he didn't belong anywhere. He'd lost all his teeth; whenever he wanted to speak, his broad lips would roll a little first, and the wrinkles in his face folded in and out like a concertina. The jet-black tuft of hair on his head looked dyed; as if he wanted to pass for younger. Odd, because he didn't seem vain.

There was something off in his way of moving and speaking, in his eyes. He told us he'd been a pro boxer from nineteen to twenty-two, then took up smoking and drinking. After that he spent years in the merchant navy, sailing the world. He knew a few words of many languages. For all his quirks he was open and kind. We laughed a lot with him, mostly thanks to his self-mockery and total lack of airs. I felt at ease around him. He helped shrink my own problems back to size.

To get by I applied for welfare. As a citizen of an EEC country I was eligible - something I hadn't known at first. I went to the social services office, showed my passport and filled in a form with my name and the address of the hostel. Upon presentation of proof of residence, I was paid forty

pounds in cash. A week's worth: twenty for the bed, twenty to live on. Just enough if I was careful. Simon tried too, but as a South African he didn't qualify.

Going down to the dole office was grim. The room was bare - wooden benches along the walls, dark-blue blotched paint long past due. In one corner, a plexiglass window with a few tiny holes for talking. That's where they paid out. The money came through a narrow slot, not even a finger wide.

Whole families waited. Kids wedged between parents, heads down - as if their parents' worries sat on their small shoulders. When it took too long, or they didn't get what they felt owed, some of the men would blow. Then I understood the empty room and the heavy shielding. Fuelled by anger and often by drink, they'd slam fists or boots against the plexiglass and curse out the staff behind it. I dreaded going back each time. But there wasn't much choice - *beggars can't be choosers*.

Bit by bit, Oscar's dark side showed. Others told me he'd spent sixteen years in a psychiatric institution for killing someone. When I asked, he confirmed it. He hadn't been out long.

'Drink ruined my life,' he said.

Yet he was drinking again. The modest, almost shy man turned into a little monster, shouting and swearing at anyone over the slightest thing. The demons took hold; sometimes he got aggressive. With me he stayed mostly calm. Somehow we tuned to each other. Simon couldn't take it. He headed for Edinburgh, hoping to find farm work.

Oscar and I stayed behind together. He was odd, damaged - yet, strangely, a kind of anchor for me.

At Bridget's

I was keeping an eye out for something better and cheaper, just to give my budget some breathing room. An ad caught my eye: a woman renting out a room in her flat for sixteen pounds a week. That was a serious saving - and odds were it would be cleaner too. I phoned, and we set a time.

A blonde woman - late thirties - opened the door when I rang. She introduced herself as Bridget and showed me the room. Small, but neat. Her voice had a friendly, slightly languid drawl, and she moved through the flat with assurance. We'd share the rest of the place. It struck me as a solid alternative, and I mentioned that social services covered my rent. She nodded - fine by her - and said I could move in that same day.

The evening went down easily - white wine, a few bites. She was forthcoming, but her jokes and asides had an edge, as if something raw sat under the cheeriness. She laughed a bit too loud at my cracks and held my eye a beat too long. A touch here and there - not pushy, but pointed enough to make me wonder what she had in mind.

At bedtime I went to 'my' room, but I lay awake. There was a charge in the air - not unpleasant, just expectant.

After a little while Bridget came in. She leaned against the frame and smiled. 'Fancy coming to lie with me?'

I didn't feel I could say no - truth is, I didn't want to. The night was good; both of us could use some human warmth.

Next day I did my usual rounds and dropped by social services to file a change of address, armed with a note from Bridget stating the rent was sixteen a week. To my surprise they refused to cover it. I couldn't make sense of it - the rent was less than the hostel.

The clerk spelt it out: unregistered tenancy. I got twenty pounds, full stop. A nasty blow. No way I could make that work.

Back at Bridget's I told her I'd have to give up the room - I couldn't afford it. She said I could stay for now, until I found something else. That kindness kept me off the street.

Over the next days I saw how much she leaned on the bottle. Puffy face, limp hair. She told me she'd once been a *Page 3 Girl* - a British topless model. She produced a yellowed clipping. I barely recognised her - a young woman with a thick mane and a challenging stare.

"But now I'm old, nobody wants me," she said, wistful, eyes on the photo - on what was gone for good.

At first we managed. Then, more and more often, she was drunk when I got home. Our talks turned into monologues of self-pity. The warmth drained out. When we slept together, it increasingly felt like I was playing a role - filling a hole rather than being wanted for myself.

One night I said no. A friend from our crew had just landed a job and slipped me some money, so I'd picked up groceries and planned to cook for us. She was low, and already well lit. I couldn't lift her mood. That night she wanted sex again; I refused. She flared, and I retreated to the room that had originally been meant for me - where I hadn't slept a single night till then.

Things slid fast after that. Most evenings she was already drunk by the time I got in. Then came the endless grievances and accusations. She demanded I come to bed with her and threatened to throw me out if I didn't.

To keep the peace I'd tuck her in. By then she was usually far gone. After that I'd slip back to my room. It kept me going - but it was obvious I had to leave.

Back to the Hostel

A few days earlier I'd run into Oscar. I told him I needed a bed; I couldn't hack it with my landlady. He said there were two empty beds in his room and he was on his own.

'Just move in.'

In the end Bridget blew up. She'd had it with me and kicked me out.

So there I was - barely a fortnight on, skint and homeless. Luckily Oscar had mentioned the empty beds.

I figured if I slipped in quietly, I could sleep there for free. Oscar didn't mind.

We pretended that I was just visiting. That worked for about a week, until one evening the landlord suddenly burst in.

"Who's paying the rent for you? You've been here a week already!" he shouted.

I tried to bluff my way through it. "What are you talking about, man? I'm just visiting."

He didn't fall for it. He had seen me come in several times in the evening and only leave again the next morning.

"If you don't pay rent right now, you're out immediately," he yelled.

I didn't want to leave - where was I supposed to go? But I couldn't pay the rent either. Oscar said he was willing to advance the money. The landlord accepted that, and after that he left us alone.

After a word, the manager wrote me a note stating I'd been in the hostel for one week. I took it to social services, got my benefit, paid Oscar back, and stayed put.

Just as we settled, a third man moved in: Angus. He knew Oscar from a psychiatric hospital - they'd been there together. Angus wasn't a saint either. He'd done twelve years

for killing a policeman, then a long stint in psychiatric care. Like Oscar, he drank hard.

All at once I was sharing a room with two hardened drunks, both with a killing on their conscience. I hardly thought about it. I kept to my own track.

Most days I was out - looking for work, new faces, a bit of life, or simply staying away from the room. The cold sharpened me. By then I knew the city like my own pocket: grey fronts, the streets, the spots where I could catch my breath. I usually only came back at night.

Oscar and Angus ran on a different clock. Their day really started when the drink kicked in - enough fuel to see them through, or at least keep them from collapsing.

So long as they stayed inside that soft blur, things went fine. There was room for a joke, a chat - sometimes even warmth. But when the line blurred, the air grew tight - the sense that things could tip. Too loud, too close, too much.

I learnt the signals. When to step back. When not to move. It was a balance. It also taught me to watch. And to listen.

With Oscar I seldom had trouble. There was a quiet mutual respect. In the evenings, when I got back, he'd often be waiting - grinning, or dropping a line that cracked me up. He had his quirks, sure, but also something disarming. Honest. Pure.

Sometimes we talked for hours - about the old days, the sea, his life, his expectations, the dreams that never came good. Then I could see the man behind the addiction - his stories, humour, flashes of wisdom. His sensitivity. And a heart larger than he'd ever dared admit.

Life in that room was messy and sometimes heavy - but it was also somewhere I could be myself. No expectations. No judgement. That alone made it bearable.

Hygiene was another matter. The place was a state. Empty tins and bottles everywhere, mouldy food, dirty clothes. The carpet was sticky. Bin bags piling up. The whole building was the same: reek of booze and damp, sick in the corridors, rubbish lying around for days. The manager expected us to clean it; no one did.

One evening he stormed into our room, furious.

'You lot are turning this place into a tip! I want it cleaned up!'

I looked up and said, deadpan, 'You're acting like this is the only filthy spot. The whole building's a dump.'

That did it. He threw me out on the spot.

This time, though, I had options. Through Jim I'd built a little network - mostly students and people around them. They took me in for a bit. A small safety net I used gratefully.

A Week of Comfort

The youth hostel was due to reopen soon. After weeks of couch-hopping and staying with friends, I was ready for it.

Then luck fell into my lap. One of our crew - a guy who'd landed a rig job a while back - had to take a course in Aberdeen. He lived in London, and a hotel had been booked for him, but he preferred to stay with friends to an anonymous room. Would I like to take his place? From the street to a proper hotel - no way was I saying no. He handed me the reservation papers so I could check in under his name for a week.

The room had its own shower and loo, with a TV at the foot of the bed. Having a space of my own, a hot shower, being properly clean - that alone felt like luxury. Otherwise

the place was dead and chilly: no atmosphere, no company. I could see why he'd rather stay with mates.

I wasn't about to complain. The only pity was that dinner wasn't included. Breakfast, though, was a feast - fish in several styles, beans, eggs, sausages, cheese, and more. Plenty to keep me going all day. What I didn't eat on the spot, I slid discreetly into a bag - especially the fish.

Birthday

The days drifted along. I had a roof - even if it was temporary - friends, and a target. Still, it remained hard to truly attach myself to anything. Everything could be over again at any moment. Life was a fragile balance, with no solid ground beneath my feet.

Then something unexpected happened on the beach.

I'd been ambling around town when a lad asked if I fancied going to the sea. We hardly knew each other, but I said yes.

Out on the horizon a rig shimmered in the haze, a silhouette above the flat water. Sun, a few lazy clouds. We walked the pale sand for a while, silent, each in our own thoughts. It felt oddly familiar, like we were searching for something without a name.

'It's my birthday, by the way,' I said, more offhand than fishing for anything.

'Really? How old?'

'Twenty-one.'

'Then we'll celebrate,' he grinned.

We passed a chippy. He popped in and came out with a hefty bag of *fish and chips*.

'For your twenty-first,' he said, handing me the parcel wrapped in newspaper.

I was on my own in a foreign country, no family or close friends to mark the milestone. Nobody knew it was my birthday - except him. And he, a stranger, gave me something that felt like a true present. It made up for a lot.

We ate on a concrete wall, watching the grey waves. Gulls screeched overhead. Grease bled through the paper onto my fingers. I don't think anything had ever tasted better.

Student life

Through Jim I met his girlfriend, Ailsa - pretty, clear-headed, studying at the university. Her sister and family were off to the States for a few months, and Ailsa could use their place in the meantime - a roomy two-storey terraced house in a row of four, on a hill not far from the airport. She was fine with me moving in too, along with her, Jim, and three others. I had my own room and we paid no rent.

Evenings were a riot: drinking, a bit of weed, games, music, and blazing arguments about politics and the world. Students drifted through constantly. If there was a party, a gig, or an alt-disco night somewhere, we went. I got pulled into Aberdeen's student life almost without noticing.

The Experiment

One evening we decided to try something - half out of curiosity, half out of playfulness, but not without seriousness. There was a boy who often stopped by, Dan. He was different from the others. Soft, receptive, as if he stood a step closer to something we merely circled around. There was something in him you felt inclined to protect, without

becoming sentimental; more a kind of sensitivity you instinctively respected.

Ailsa had read somewhere - or perhaps once experienced herself - that when a group of people focuses all their attention on a single person, holding one shared image in mind, it can transfer to someone who opens himself to it. A kind of transmission, as if thought and presence could briefly take the same shape.

Dan offered himself as the subject.

We went to the kitchen and agreed on the person we would focus on. Someone we knew, but Dan didn't. Back in the room we sat in a silent half circle, facing him. The light was dimmed. A kind of solemn stillness filled the room.

We focused.

Awkward at first, then deeper.

The silence seemed to thicken.

It began subtly. Dan shifted his posture - exactly as the person we were thinking of always did: leaning slightly forward, as if catching a thought halfway.

He whispered a word.

Then another.

And suddenly a whole sentence - her sentence, her way of saying it, exactly her tone.

Ailsa asked a question only someone who knew her could answer.

Dan responded at once.

Without thinking.

Without searching for words.

As if he simply knew.

'Just say whatever comes to you,' Ailsa said softly.

He mentioned a detail so specific it felt as if someone in the room briefly lost their breath. Not something you could

guess. Not something you'd say by chance. A small peculiarity only she had.

He noticed our silence and asked,

'Should I stop?'

No one replied.

He continued a little longer - small remarks, seemingly casual, yet each one on target.

Then he stopped of his own accord.

He looked down at the floor and said,

'Did I ruin it or not?'

'No,' we said almost at once. 'Quite the opposite.'

I was stunned. How was this possible, I wondered - and I wasn't the only one.

In that mixture of play and seriousness, music, conversations, and unexpected evenings, I found in Ailsa's group what I had been unconsciously looking for: a place with kind, like-minded people. Boys and girls my age. Just living, talking, listening to music - nothing required, everything allowed, and a place where you could simply be who you were without explanation.

It felt like a new phase. I began to settle in. And with it came new experiences - also in the realm of consciousness.

LSD

A regular visitor handed me two tabs of LSD one day. We had sometimes talked about psychedelic drugs. I had shared my experiences with mushrooms - including the paranoid side. The others were wary of it, but curious too.

I saved the tabs, and when he turned up again one evening he brought enough for the lot of us. If we were going to try, better together. Safer.

About an hour in, it came on. Subtle at first, almost a whisper - and then the same bliss I'd felt on mushrooms.

Everything breathed. A wall-shadow opened into a landscape. I could stare at a pattern for ages, always finding something new. Things I usually missed woke up under my eyes. Someone put music on; it felt like it came from inside, not out. The room pulsed with it. Shapes swelled and shrank. Words thinned out the moment anyone spoke.

I had to go outside - into the night. The road climbed a hill above the airport. I sat at the top and drank in the runway lights. Time fell away. Everything was one - no future, no past. Only the present, long and quiet.

Toward dawn the cold seeped in. I came back to earth and knew it was time to head home. A few people were asleep in the lounge. The clock said six hours had passed. It felt as if I'd visited another world and brought a trace back with me.

New Music

At Ailsa's, a flood of new sounds rolled in - different rhythms, new textures, fresh voices.

We played a lot of Fela Kuti and other African acts. Joy Division split the room - some sank into that suicidal melancholy; others couldn't stand it. We also played Patti Smith, Roxy Music, the B-52s, Talking Heads, Hawkwind, Simple Minds, Santana - and many more.

What hit me hardest was British reggae - Steel Pulse, Black Uhuru, UB40. For a few pennies I'd picked up a second-hand Walkman, and someone made me a tape of nothing but that. It plugged straight into me; I couldn't get enough. Walking the streets with that groove in my ears, time went slack. I floated from A to B.

The Moonies

I kept one foot in my starting place too. The youth hostel had reopened. Even with a bed at Ailsa's, I still dropped by - meeting others looking for rig work. It stayed our rendezvous. The manager found me odd jobs; I earned a bit on the side. Finally, no more social services.

On my way there, walking through the city to the beat of that glorious reggae groove, I suddenly bumped into another world. On Union Street near Union Terrace Gardens stood a group with flowers and big placards about love, salvation, and Christ's return. The Moonies.

I was curious and wanted to hear them out. Among them was a Dutch girl, Judith. She held a flower out as if to offer it, but her eyes kept scanning the passers-by. Her smile disarmed me.

She told me her faith: Reverend Moon was the promised Messiah, the second coming of Christ. He would finish the work Jesus hadn't been able to complete because of the crucifixion. There was a purity in her voice that, for a moment, hushed my scepticism.

Still, the story jarred. For me, crucifixion and resurrection were the victory of spiritual life over death. What was left unfinished? What could Moon add?

Judith moved through the shoppers with the others, flowers and leaflets in hand, seeking eyes. Calmly insistent, she spoke to people; only a few paused. Most turned her down politely or didn't engage at all. She didn't quit. Her dedication moved me. Now and then someone listened for a minute, took a flower, and went on.

'It isn't easy to get the message across,' she said when we sat a moment on a bench.

She gave a thin smile.

'The apostles didn't have it easy either. But look what came of that.'

Did she truly believe Moon would win the world? I felt a tug of pity. The stories about the Moonies were troubling - brainwashing, coercion, street recruiting to widen Moon's reach. And he owned several media companies; he was a businessman, after all.

I asked whether she did this freely or was sent. She said she was entirely free and did it out of love for Moon.

'But you have to, don't you?' I probed.

'You're the foot soldiers; stop and you're out?'

She shrugged; bad press slid off her.

'I live in a warm community. I belong. We go on mission together, share what we learn, help those who struggle. It gives meaning. How many people can say that?'

Hard to argue with that. If that was her truth, who was I to judge?

She said she'd be getting married soon. I swallowed - so she was spoken for. When I asked who the man was, and whether he was in the group, she said she didn't know yet. There'd be a mass wedding, and Reverend Moon would choose her husband. She was sure he'd choose well, and that the man she married would become her great love.

I couldn't process it - a Dutch girl so ready to be paired with a stranger. Naively, I hoped I might sway her - but time was short.

They were only in Aberdeen a few days; then back to Dunbar, where the group lived. I was sorry she'd be gone so soon. She must have sensed that; she invited me to visit. I could eat, stay the night - and they did all sorts during the day.

It was tempting. And maybe there was more between us.

'When's best?' I asked.

'Weekends,' she said.

From Friday to Sunday they held meetings open to outsiders. We set a date.

A week later I hitchhiked to Dunbar to spend the weekend with them.

A Warm Bath with Cold Edges

It wasn't just a house; it was a villa - driveway, broad lawn, ponds all round, rock gardens and flowerbeds clipped into clean, geometric lines. Here and there, great old oaks stood like sentries who'd guarded the place for generations. Their bare branches traced the mild sky, waiting for the first leaves.

For someone who'd been drifting from place to place with no solid ground, this felt like a luxurious welcome. Surreal. I felt small, out of place. What was I doing here? Did I fit at all?

Inside they'd set aside a room for me - with a bed, a wardrobe, and a handwritten card on the pillow saying *welcome*. Everyone was friendly, almost too friendly. At times it gave me the jitters.

That wasn't how it went with my own friends.

Besides me there were two new arrivals: a young man and a young woman. They looked as if they'd come to join for real. They hung on the members' words as though they'd already found what they were looking for.

Day one, we were invited to share our stories. Seven of us in a circle - four community members, three visitors. A woman facilitated. Calm voice, engaged eyes.

'Who'd like to begin?' she asked.

The boy raised his hand. I guessed he was slightly older than I was, and he said he studied philosophy at the Univer-

sity of Edinburgh. He was disappointed, because the answers about life he was looking for couldn't be found there. Everything went through the intellect. That was why he had immersed himself in Buddhism and other Eastern religions. According to him, they stood closer to the truth, but he also found them very abstract. He missed the warmth, the love. He had turned his back on Christianity because he believed the Church was nothing more than a power structure that manipulated people for its own gain.

'I'm searching,' he said. 'This weekend I wanted to see if I might find here the answers I've been longing for.'

The girl was visibly ill at ease when it was her turn. She hesitated, lowered her head, and started to cry. The facilitator and a couple of members were at her side at once. They told her she didn't have to say a word if she didn't want to. Another time, when she was ready.

She gathered her courage anyway and, tears in her eyes, told us she had lost her baby. After years of drug use, she had an unwanted pregnancy. That was her signal to stop. She checked into rehab with real resolve and came out clean after a few months.

Life picked up. She was assigned a small flat, rent covered by the state, plus a welfare payment. Space to prepare for the child.

'It was the happiest time of my life,' she said. 'I lived for my child-to-be, and the new start. No drugs, no stress, no money worries. At last I had a clear purpose.'

She brushed away a tear.

Two months ago, after the birth, it went wrong. The baby - a girl - had a fatal heart defect. She died three days later.

'I feel so guilty,' she whispered. 'If I hadn't lived like that, maybe she'd have been okay. What have I done to my child?'

Her hands clenched until the knuckles blanched. She fought the grief and then let it take her. The room was shaken; the facilitator called a short break.

When we came back, it was my turn. Judith watched me closely, interested. I didn't know what to say. My life story didn't feel like much. I preferred listening. I wasn't used to speaking about my feelings or even noticing them. But the girl's story had cracked something open. A rush of feelings ran through me. If I let them go, I'd cry too. The loneliness of my childhood; that grinding need for my father's recognition. The constant sense I didn't count. Years of school-yard bullying. The distance between me and everyone else. Even here, in Scotland, with all the friends I had, I sometimes felt painfully alone. As if I didn't truly belong anywhere.

I didn't want to go there. I never had. I was afraid of what it might set loose. My stomach knotted, my head warmed. I blushed. Words stuck in my throat. I sipped from my glass, lowered my gaze, and thought: what have I started?

Eventually I steadied; the tightness eased and I played it safe. I talked about London and Aberdeen, meeting Judith, and how our talks had sparked my curiosity. That's why I'd come.

The Divine Principle

The next morning we were introduced to the book *The Divine Principle* by Sun Myung Moon. The core of his teaching was that universal love was only possible through the restoration of pure family bonds. According to him, all people, races, and religions had to be united into a single world family. He placed great emphasis on sexual purity, arranged marriages, discipline, and obedience. As Judith

had already explained earlier, Moon saw himself as the Messiah - sent by God to complete the work of Christ.

After the talk, a break, then Q&A. I hung back to see where the others would go. The regulars waited patiently. The girl stayed quiet; so did I. The boy spoke:

'But how do you know Moon is the Messiah?'

The leader answered: 'We can't know. Religion isn't science. We believe he is the Messiah because we feel the love he radiates and judge him by his deeds. We believe he can unite the world into a single community at peace.'

Faith Is a Choice

Something clicked for the boy. Belief - rather than knowledge. Then the dilemma followed.

"Okay, how can you know that what you believe is the right thing, or that what you believe is actually the truth?" he asked.

The leader nodded thoughtfully.

"That's an interesting question. Does anyone have an answer to that?"

Silence. It was a fair point. You can believe almost anything - even that the neighbour's dog is the Messiah. If you truly believe it, then it's "true" for you - but that doesn't make it truth. How do you decide what is really true?

One member spoke up:

'We can know very little - perhaps nothing at all - and everything we treat as true is, in fact, belief. Yet we make choices daily without certainty. We can only believe. Most of the time, things work out - which suggests our beliefs often land near the truth. You can trust that. In the same way we can believe that Mr Moon is the Messiah.'

'That's personal,' the boy said.

'I could believe something else just as well - and that would be 'true' too.'

'Exactly.'

'Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad - all true?'

'For those who believe in them, yes. We believe in Moon.'

The room went quiet.

Faith is a choice, I thought.

We're free to believe whatever we want, without ever knowing for sure. Still, most people believe in God - or in something higher. Remarkable, really. I believed, too. In God, in Jesus. That belief gave me trust in life: that life is good, that love exists.

For a time I'd sworn off faith. Wanted nothing to do with it. But I came back because I missed something - trust itself. Without God, I felt lonelier, more unsure. Was faith just a filler for the void? A crutch to make life bearable - that's what people call it. Maybe. But it didn't do much for me, because that, too, depends on what you choose to believe.

I raised my hand.

'Through his crucifixion and resurrection, Christ conquered death. He opened the way to eternal life in the spirit. What does Mr Moon think he can add?'

The leader replied:

'Christ set us on the right track, but he didn't bring peace. That work remains.'

I hadn't seen such a simple answer coming. It threw me off balance for a moment.

I tried to stay calm - never my strongest suit in situations like this. Luckily, the atmosphere was relaxed, which helped.

Then the word *Messiah* suddenly came to mind. It means *savior*. But what, then, are we supposed to be saved

from? From suffering, from the yoke of matter, from death. That was the message, wasn't it? If Jesus Christ had already accomplished that, why would there be a new Messiah? And did Sun Myung Moon, as a peacemaker, even fit into that picture?

I hesitated, then spoke anyway.

'If Moon is the Messiah, what exactly is the redemption he brings?'

'He frees us from war and mutual conflict,' she said. 'His aim is unity among people so we can live in peace. A paradise on earth. Isn't that what we all want?'

'So not from death?'

'No,' she said. 'Jesus has already done that.'

That was enough for me.

It closed something off. Not only in the conversation - but also in me.

Group Pressure

After the Q&A we broke into small groups where you could bring your own topic. We sang together at set times. Everything moved along gently. It felt like a pleasant place.

We spent most of our time in a large living room, windows to the floor, flooded with natural light. Light-ochre walls warmed the space. The furnishing was simple but tasteful - open floor, clusters of chairs and tables here and there. In one corner, two big sofas and some armchairs around a low table. By the entrance a lush subtropical plant swayed with the comings and goings, subtly filtering the sunlight that fell in.

Between activities I often sought Judith out for a walk in the garden. Quietly, I hoped she might feel something for me. That hope, it turned out, was in vain.

They prayed before meals. No one forced you to join. At first I kept my head down: those prayers were to Reverend Moon, and I didn't believe in him.

When they sang, I stuck to songs that didn't feel suspect. Day one, that was easy enough; I could ring-fence my own space. Day two, it got harder. I was 'free,' sure - but when I sat it out, I felt the distance. No one was less kind or judgmental, yet a quiet dilemma kept forming: belong, or hold back? Day three, I bowed my head with the rest. My lips moved; the words stayed mine.

It still felt like cheating on myself. The urge to fit in was starting to win.

'Do I want that?' I asked myself.

I weighed my precarious life against the comfort these people had. Peace reigned here; people were gentle with one another. The other newcomers went all in. I held out; something didn't sit right. It felt too good to be true.

Even so, the group tugged at me - an invisible hand trying to draw me into their world, their certainty. I started to doubt. Insisting on being myself, separate from the group, began to feel like swimming upstream. On the other hand, I wouldn't submit to a creed I didn't believe - however warm and sincere they seemed.

They saw the struggle and said I could stay longer if I wished.

That's when it clicked: I needed to leave.

Above all, I had come for Judith. Naively I'd hoped something might grow between us. But she had already given herself away - first to Moon, and now to her imaginary husband. There was no wedge to fit in there. As if it were my job to undo a choice she had made herself.

I stayed one more night. The next morning I left. Back to Aberdeen, back to myself.

A Missed Gig, a Dream Realised

By late April I'd been around five months. Although I kept to my goal and did the rounds of the companies every single day, I also had so many distractions with friends at Ailsa's and elsewhere that, on the whole, I was doing fine.

One afternoon, when for once I'd skipped my route, I was walking along Union Street and saw a long queue outside the Capitol - the biggest theatre in town. What on earth? The line stretched a hundred metres at least, snaking round the back. Then I saw it: a huge poster announcing, **Tonight: The Rolling Stones!**

'The Stones? In Aberdeen? And nobody told me?'

I could hardly believe it. Was it for real? *It was.* A try-out ahead of a major tour, their first gig in seventeen years. A once-only chance. I'd never been a superfan, but to see them this close? Unmissable.

The queue was the snag. I'd be there for hours and might still miss out. Then I spotted a familiar face already near the front, fifth or sixth in line. I slid over, struck up a chat, and talking away - no one objected - we edged forward. Before long I was at the window and bought two tickets, the limit. I felt minted, already weighing who to take.

But it didn't come to that. They turned out to be looking for me at the house where I was staying. A call had come in from a company that wanted to speak to me. Jim eventually found me and said I had to get in touch immediately - it was urgent. He had written the company's name and phone number on a slip of paper.

It turned out to be Westburne Drilling - a Canadian contractor for offshore platforms, one I walked past every day. That sounded promising. I called them, and they

offered me a job, but I would have to leave for the platform that very same day.

I was thrilled - finally, work. And gutted - of all the days. Two Stones tickets burning a hole in my pocket: could the timing be worse? Dream it, or ditch it. I chose the dream.

I left my remaining cash with my fellow fortune-seekers, as we'd agreed. I gave the tickets to the youth hostel manager and his wife - as thanks for their help. Not everyone at Ailsa's was pleased; they'd have liked them. But I had to choose.

First Time Offshore

That afternoon I packed my things. There was barely time for goodbyes. A car collected me and two others and took us straight to the heliport.

It was my first time in a helicopter. We lifted off over the harbour, the granite city shrinking beneath us, then skimmed out across the sea - grey, endless, rolling. After about an hour a huge silhouette shouldered up through the haze: the rig - Brent Delta.

It was gigantic: a city of steel, cranes, pipework and decks, firmly planted in the middle of nowhere. I felt small - and thrilled. At last, I was in.

We touched down on the helideck, rotors whipping the air. Inside: echoing corridors, stairwells, steel doors. The smell hit first - oil, metal, disinfectant.

They showed me my cabin: two bunks, lockers, a tiny porthole. I dropped my bag and lay back for a moment. Unreal. That morning I'd been on Union Street, staring at a Stones poster. Now I was miles out at sea.

The rota was fourteen on, fourteen off: twelve-hour shifts - nights one stretch, days the next. Why the rush to get

me out there, I couldn't tell - there was hardly any work. Mostly we pressure-washed algal bloom from the steel, even inside the leg casings. In heavy rain gear, hose in hand, I trudged stairways that seemed endless. I did the job, though I couldn't see the point.

On the Brent Delta, drilling had already ceased. The number of wells planned - usually some forty to fifty per platform - were already in production. The classic image of an oil rig - with a derrickman lowering drill pipes and roughnecks coupling them with heavy tongs - did not apply here. The work was mainly maintenance: cleaning, painting, and general odd jobs.

A handful of lads greeted me like an old mate. They knew me from town and were glad I'd finally made it. The supervisor I didn't know: a Highlander with a thick accent and a habit of tailing off his sentences. I'd handled plenty of accents, but his beat me at first. Later I heard he'd told the office I didn't speak English. The woman who relayed it only shrugged.

'Your English is fine,' she said. 'It's the Scots that's tricky.'

We were about sixty meters above the sea. On the waves below us, a small boat was constantly bobbing. If you were to fall off, they could pick you up quickly. But that never happened. Everything was so well secured. Boat or no boat, the chances of survival in the ice-cold water were slim - at most two and a half minutes. I wondered what those people did down there all day.

The food was excellent. If you felt like it, you could have a hot meal three times a day, with all the trimmings. I shared my cabin with a colleague. There was also a common room where you could play table tennis or snooker, watch TV or videos, or play cards. If you wanted to work on your fitness, there was a gym with a reasonably good range of equip-

ment. Alcohol was not sold and was strictly forbidden - something I could well understand in a place like this. Unlike Denmark and Norway, women were not allowed on British oil rigs.

The first fourteen days passed cleanly enough. Back on shore I picked up my pay: a cheque for £570 - my entry fee into another life. I lived it a little: new clothes, more nights out, dinners with friends, taxis on a whim. Two weeks later I climbed back into the Chinook. The money was gone.

Home on Leave

After two rotations at sea, I felt it was time to visit my family. I was healthy, had money in my pocket, and felt I'd achieved something. The lean months had meant something. I wanted to show myself - as I was now. Stronger. Independent. Someone who had made it on his own.

Maybe I'd finally hear what I'd never heard growing up: "*You did well.*"

I booked Aberdeen-Amsterdam and took the train home. I'd called ahead; they knew I was coming. Still, it felt like another audition. My life had moved on; theirs, maybe not.

I brought my mother a light-blue kilt and a hand-knitted wool jumper. But my real prep was what I'd wear. I wanted to impress - especially my father. I chose everything: trousers, jacket, hair.

Even the shoes were a statement.

I wanted him to see: *I'm fine. I've found my feet. You can be proud.*

He wasn't. He greeted me as if I'd been there yesterday. No surprise, no hint of recognition. Flat, indifferent - as if none of it mattered. I had little to tell him anyway, as his

interest was minimal, and with him everything quickly returned to the order of the day.

My mother cried and hugged me like she could press me back in time. ‘

You’re so thin,’ she said softly. ‘

‘It only looks that way,’ I said. ‘We eat like builders on the rig.’

She laughed through tears and held me a moment longer.

Marleen was delighted. She grabbed my bag, hauled me into the kitchen, and wanted every detail.

‘Is it really that tough?’

‘You get used to it,’ I said.

‘You look older,’ she added.

I shrugged. ‘That’s work.’

She grinned. ‘Or wisdom.’

I let it hang.

Karin was cooler - probably thinking, *here he is again*.

At least they could see I was doing well. I kept the worst bits to myself. In February I’d sent a letter about the grind of job-hunting, but that was behind me. Mission accomplished.

Still, the silence from my father gnawed at me. A gap I couldn’t cross.

‘Was this for me, or for him?’ I wondered. Did I want his approval so badly I’d do anything, just to hear: ‘*Well done, son?*’

Maybe.

But there was pride, too. The real kind. He couldn’t touch that anymore.

My hometown friends made it clear they appreciated me, and I mostly hung out with them.

After ten days in the Netherlands, I flew back to

Aberdeen. The farewell felt strange. I returned to my new existence; they stayed behind. The bond was broken once again, and it affected me more than I had expected.

Yet, this was the path I had chosen. No certainty awaited me, no recognition. I wanted to do it alone - to live my own life. And a new phase began: living together with Ailsa.

With Ailsa

On shore leave I gravitated to Aberdeen, to the crowd at Ailsa's. Now and then I'd shoot down to London to see Scott - usually for a couple of days, then back. Scott said Fred had hit the lottery - about sixty grand. He quit Toyota and started enjoying himself; nobody begrudged him a penny. I briefly toyed with moving back to London now that I was earning well, but that chapter felt closed.

Then Ailsa's sister came back from the States and we had to move out.

Ailsa found a small place to rent in Potterton, a village just outside the city. She and Jim had split, and she asked if I'd move in - share the costs. I liked her a lot and said yes without hesitation.

I quietly hoped we might become something. Early on I thought I saw the tells - her eyes holding mine a beat too long, a laugh a shade too bright at something I'd said. On nights when we sat side by side on the sofa, the same thought kept circling: *maybe...*

But as the weeks passed it was clear she saw me as a housemate and a friend. She liked having me around, but kept a line. One evening she said, almost in passing, that after Jim she was ready for someone solid. Someone who radiated calm.

I knew what she meant - and what she left unsaid.

Evenings stayed warm and easy - just without any promise. We lived like siblings, separate rooms.

With offshore pay in my pocket, I did have the odd girl-friend - but nothing lasted. More often than not they wanted something from me, while the women I liked didn't seem interested.

Ailsa was studying English literature. In the evenings, by the electric heater, she would sometimes read me Old English texts. To my surprise I recognised many words and sounds.

“How come?” I asked.

English, she said, was saturated with the tongues of the Angles and Saxons - tribes from northern Germany who crossed the Channel around AD 500. Their territory bordered where I came from, and a variant of their speech - Saxon - was spoken in our parts too. That's why it rang familiar.

I was fascinated by how closely our languages wove together.

After about four months, Ailsa fell in love with Brendan, a laid-back Canadian who worked for the same company as I did and was about ten years older than we were. We got along well - as, in fact, everyone did.

When she moved in with him, our little household dissolved. It wasn't a fight - more a gentle shift - but it felt like a warm, quiet dream thinning out. Something that might have been, passing without fuss. I was happy for her, but left with a vague sense of loss.

I needed a new base. As it happened, a few mates had a house in the same village. I moved in with them.

The Potterton Crowd

Two of them I knew already: Irish Jim - so named to tell him from Scottish Jim, Ailsa's ex - and Ewan.

Irish Jim was a talker from Belfast - ginger hair, eyes that sparked, a past of barricades and marches. He could hold forth for hours on politics, history, or his stint in the Orkneys, where he claimed to have worked every job going. He liked experimenting with drugs and tried anything he could get his hands on. And yet he had a calming streak - as if words kept his head from boiling over.

We'd met in pubs and at the kind of parties where you keep bumping into the same faces. There was a loose cloud of kindred spirits - no fixed crew, more a swarm re-forming on the breeze. I was part of it, like Jim and Ewan.

Ewan was cut differently. Upper-class upbringing, with a trace of arrogance that never quite left him. Still, he was one of the lads. No shame, no brakes - the centre of gravity whenever he walked in. He'd been a commando, fought in Northern Ireland - ironically, against Jim's side. But the first night they met in a pub, they clicked. From then on they were inseparable, like veterans of the same story from opposite ends.

There was also Julian, a quiet Englishman who, like me, worked offshore, and a William who didn't stay long. The house was a turnstile. When Julian or I were out at sea, others took our bunks.

We laughed, drank, smoked, argued, flipped records for hours. And friends were always dropping by.

Something Lost Along the Way

Once I had steady work, I hardly saw the other rig-seekers anymore. Our little band had scattered. Most had jobs and were spread across the country or beyond. Because of the rotation schedule, you never saw some people again. If I was ashore for fourteen days while someone else was on the platform, you simply didn't meet anymore.

The people who had helped me through difficult times had also largely disappeared from view, such as the manager of the youth hostel and Oscar, my roommate there, and others. Since I was earning good money, I no longer needed them. I was free to do as I pleased.

Yet it didn't feel like true liberation. I missed the fellowship - the solidarity and the small acts of kindness that held us together. Everyone peeled off to their own path. I couldn't complain - I'd reached my goal - but something precious had slipped away.

On a Live Drilling Rig

By then I'd left Brent Delta for North Cormorant in the Cormorant Field - a live drilling rig, which made the work far more engaging.

I was a *roustabout* - the platform's general hand - laying out drill pipe so it could be picked up and hoisted cleanly. The *derrickman*, high in the tower, lowered each joint into the hole; the *roughnecks* on the floor spun them together with big tongs. The *driller* ran the show from his cabin. He was our boss.

The shifts were fine; I'd adapted to twelve hours. Around five a.m. on nights I sometimes had to fight sleep - especially when the floor went quiet.

The physical strain was manageable, but the climate made it tough at times. We were on a platform about 150 kilometres northeast of the Shetland Islands. That far north, the seasonal contrasts were extreme. In summer it stayed light almost all day: around midnight the sun dipped below the horizon, only to rise again an hour later. In winter it didn't get light until around ten in the morning, and by three in the afternoon it was already dark - not to mention the cold, heavy precipitation, and wind.

Usually we flew to Lerwick on the Shetlands, then heli-copterred out. Sometimes a Chinook took us straight from Aberdeen. Storms could be brutal. In high winds you stayed inside - no heroics near the edge.

The helideck was the real trap - slick, exposed, no cover. In a blow they stretched a heavy rope across it, and you gripped your way to the stairwell. Some gusts hit so hard it felt as if you could lift off at any moment - straight into the black, freezing sea. And no one would ever find you again.

The enclosed world

I liked the job well enough, but over time the thought of shipping out to that sealed-off world at sea filled me with dread. It felt more and more like doing time. The night before I left, I barely slept. The moment I woke I knew: here we go.

In the days before departure, I noticed my mood sinking. The prospect of being isolated for weeks at a time began to weigh more and more heavily. Time ashore always seemed too short. I didn't know whether this feeling would last, or whether I would eventually be able to accept it as a way of life.

Plenty of guys had families; for them it was a regular job.

Some lived as far as Ireland and flew back and forth every two weeks. The schedule still hammered a lot of marriages.

They'd joke: "Just when my wife's used to me being gone, I walk in. Once she's used to me being home, I'm off again."

Everyone dealt with that tension in their own way.

For some, the urge to escape was stronger than the need for rest. There were colleagues who, as soon as they came ashore, partied for fourteen days and did everything God had forbidden. Then they'd drag themselves onto the Chinook or a plane wrecked, and two weeks later - feeling brand-new - do it all again.

Smoke Between the Lines

At sea we also had our way of escaping. Almost all of us smoked hash. After work we would eat and shower, then gather in someone's cabin to smoke joints together.

Getting it out there wasn't hard, though you had to watch it - bags were checked at the airfield with that in mind. If they caught you, you were gone on the spot. It happened to a mate who'd just bought a cottage in the Highlands. He lost his job, and we lost a friend. It was rough, because all of us did it - often in his cabin. Everyone knew the risk. It could just as easily have been me. But we kept quiet and carried on.

Giving the Sea a Voice

Management rolled out a requirement: everyone on shift had to write a safety report with suggestions for improvement - fire hazards, fall risks, any unsafe conditions. I had to file one too. I didn't fancy listing the usual suspects. Let

others tick those boxes, I thought. What really grated was that Britain still used nasty chemicals to lubricate the bit when cutting through hard rock - stuff banned elsewhere. They were brutal for the environment. Norway had already outlawed them; they flushed with water only. So I devoted my report to the risks of *oil-based mud*, as that compound is known in the industry.

A day after I handed it in, the boss came over and laughed.

'Nice piece, but we can't do anything with it,' he said.

To be honest, I hadn't expected otherwise.

He waved the paper with a broad grin under my nose.
'I'll keep it. I like it.'

Dublin

With offshore pay you're up for most things. Money's secondary - shore leave is for pleasure. You want to treat yourself after two weeks boxed in. Someone pitches something daft with a promise of a rush or a new story? You go.

Ewan had a pilot's licence and suggested we rent a plane and hop over to Dublin. Sounded perfect. Five of us chipped in, and Ewan lined up an old army crate. We lifted off from Aberdeen on a bright Saturday. The little aircraft was so loud and skittish in the air currents that I wondered mid-flight *if we'd make it*. I was used to helicopters: loud, yes, but steady. This relic yawed all over. We pressed Ewan; he admitted he hadn't flown in ages and didn't know this model. As we went on, he found his touch.

Around two in the afternoon we landed safely in Dublin. We agreed to meet back at five; if you were late, you'd have to sort your own way home. I spent the afternoon exploring alone - Guinness, people-watching, street

musicians and performers. I even nodded off in a park and had to hurry to make the rendezvous.

Family From Home

While I was testing limits in Scotland, home turned up on the doorstep. Marleen wanted to visit. I wasn't sure how to feel. I wanted to see her, she wanted to see me - but my life here was also my little secret. Here I could be whoever I chose, no explanations. If she came, I might have to explain. I didn't want to.

She's always been my confidante - the one I could tell things not meant for others. Warm, low on judgement. Still, I balked: we smoked hash every evening. That was our rhythm. Bringing my sister into that felt like crossing a line.

She kept at it, and in the end I agreed. She came with her friend Els for two weeks. We all stayed at Irish Jim and Ewan's. The lads were happy - two bright guests in the house. It clicked, and my worries faded. We gave each other space; they did their thing, I did mine. Sometimes we did something together - Aberdeen, drives through Scotland, pub meals - and most nights we ended up back home. But most of the time they were on their own.

Still, I didn't feel entirely free. One night the three of us were in the living room. I reached to roll a joint, like always, and my hand stalled above the little tin of shag and hash. I glanced at Marleen and hesitated. In the end, I did it anyway. She wasn't particularly impressed and had seen it coming. I didn't have to explain anything. She understood. This was my life.

Shortly afterwards, something else came up that I hadn't accounted for: a mandatory three-day fire safety course in Dundee. That piece of paper was non-negotiable if I wanted

to stay on the rig. The timing grated, but there was no choice. The women were happy to tag along - a small escape, a change from Aberdeen. So we decided to make something of it. Morning train, coats zipped against the wind; outside the window, slick roads and a lid of low cloud slid past.

By day I cycled through drills and live-burn exercises; Marleen and Els drifted through town - shops, café tables, tea, a pub or two. Come evening we met in a plain hotel that smelled of old carpet and coffee lingering in the corridor. In the dining room sat the regulars: older, weathered faces - working men, single, mostly silent.

That first night I woke to a scream - my first thought: Marleen. I jumped up, hit the light. Their door was open. A man lurched out, followed by two terrified girls in night-clothes. Someone had slipped in. He windmilled his arms and pointed upward.

'*Welders*,' he yelled. I had no idea what he meant.

'Can't you see them? *Welders - everywhere!*'

The woman who ran the hotel had heard the commotion and came upstairs. She gently took the man by the arm and led him down. I didn't know exactly what was wrong - he seemed harmless, but clearly unwell. The girls calmed and, a little shaky, went back to bed.

Next morning the landlady explained he'd gone into a drinking delirium. Hence the flashes - welders in his head. No need to worry; he'd been admitted to a clinic.

Back from Dundee, we had to say goodbye sooner than I would have liked. My sister's holiday didn't quite line up with my time on shore. When I had to go back offshore, they still had a few days. I asked if they minded spending them at the lads' place. I hardly needed to ask: I could see it on their faces. Finally, properly free.

The Pushback Grows

My resistance to being confined for two weeks only continued to grow. I coped with it worse and worse. In the days before departure I wrestled each time with the same question: do I make something of it, or let the inevitable wash over me?

On the platform I did my job well. A promotion to roughneck was in the air - by then I had enough experience and was fully pulling my weight. The driller thought highly of me. He called me a smart guy and regularly boasted about me to others. But that kind of appreciation quickly faded when faced with the endless sea, with no land in sight for miles.

The industry itself had begun to turn against me as well - especially the way nature was made to suffer. At times I thought back to that report, to those few A4 pages in which I had tried to say something meaningful about the bigger picture - about the waste we were pumping into the sea as if it could absorb it endlessly. No one did anything with it. I knew that. But it was still there, in the back of my mind. I had spoken it out loud, and it wouldn't go away.

A small accident once sent me ashore early. While mixing oil-based mud I got powder in my eye and burned part of my cornea. I rinsed immediately with the proper solution, so the damage was limited. Medical still pulled me off for checks. A tiny scar remained - felt like a grain of sand - annoying, but it faded fast.

Next hitch I could work as normal. I was paid less, though, because I'd left the platform early. I found that unfair. I hadn't had a choice. Slowly, things began to pile up.

Car Crash

One afternoon a girl turned up. The scene intrigued her: a bunch of square pegs trying to fit into a place like Potterton. She stayed for hours. Toward evening she asked if someone could run her home to Belhelvie. Ewan was the only one with wheels, but he couldn't be bothered.

'Give me the keys,' I said. 'I'll take her.'

He tossed me the key to his clapped-out old Jaguar.

Cold bit outside. A light veil of mist lifted off the fields. I didn't yet realise how thick it really was.

Getting there was fine - limited visibility, but manageable. In Belhelvie she stepped out, turned, and waved. The cabin light caught her face for a second. A quick smile - and then the fog swallowed her.

On the way back it had grown worse. The fog lay over the land like a wet sheet. Dead still. I drove slowly, barely twenty kilometers an hour. The headlights cut through a cottony emptiness. I could just make out the verge.

Leaning forward over the steering wheel, I stared into a white wall. The windshield wipers swept back and forth uselessly. The lines in the middle of the road appeared one by one. Slow. Monotonous. The only thing to hold on to. It felt as if I were driving by touch.

Suddenly two headlights, bright and close.

But it was already too late.

A head-on collision.

Then a sharp hissing sound.

For a moment there was nothing. Only the roaring in my ears - and the realization: this is wrong.

With intense pain in my left leg, I crawled out of the car. For a moment I thought something was broken - but I could stand, limping, trembling. I staggered toward the other car,

wanting to know how badly the driver was hurt. I saw a boy my own age. His face pale, his mouth open in fear or pain - I couldn't quite tell. I wanted to help him, but I couldn't get him out. He was trapped between the steering wheel and the seat. I shouted something, but I no longer remember what.

I didn't know what to do, and slowly it dawned on me that it was my fault. The cause was clear: my car was on the wrong side of the road. In the thick haze I had changed lanes without realizing it.

A few cars stopped. People ran back and forth, their voices hollow in the fog. Shortly after, the police arrived, and then the fire brigade. With their help, the boy was pulled from the wreck and placed on a stretcher. He was taken away with wailing sirens.

I stood there, lost. I stared in disbelief at what I had caused. At all those people and emergency services trying to salvage what could still be salvaged. I felt powerless. An intense cold ran through my body. I stood there shaking on my legs. One of the firefighters wrapped a blanket around me. It barely helped. It was above all the shock, and the feeling of total abandonment, that had driven all warmth from my body. I couldn't believe it. I was living in a dream. This can't be real. What have I done?

The police sat me in the van. They were kind enough. Breath test - negative.

'Have you taken any drugs?' one of them asked, eyes steady.

'No,' I said.

Not entirely true. Hours earlier I'd had a joint with the lads. Could that have skewed my senses? Was that why I made a mistake like this? I doubted it - and yet the doubt set in. Guilt followed close behind.

If that was the reason, I'd never forgive myself.

The police dropped me back in Potterton and arranged tows for both cars. I told Ewan. He waved it off - the Jag was scrap anyway. I offered to cover everything and pay him for the car. He wouldn't hear of it. The tow bill, fine.

What kept gnawing was the other driver. How was he? Next day I took flowers to the hospital. He looked surprised to see me, then pleased. Tom, my age. His leg in plaster. The surgeons said the lower leg was shattered. Maybe he'd never walk right again. It winded me. What had I caused in my foolishness? But Tom didn't lay blame. He was easy, almost cheerful, and we were talking like old mates in minutes.

His generosity lightened the guilt for a while. It even felt like we might become friends. I went home thinking we'd understood each other. Life had other plans.

Then the letters came. Lawyers. I'd assumed it would sort itself out: healthcare covered by the state, insurers duking it out, Ewan's costs on me. Nothing to worry about. Tom's insurer went after me personally. I hadn't seen that coming.

Suddenly I was exposed - no cover, no shield. I didn't know if I could face it: the responsibility, the forms, the lot. Fear of going under financially - it felt like a world I didn't have the keys to.

Alone, in a country not my own, under rules I didn't know. And then there were the lawyers, sending letters full of ominous riddles. It didn't feel like this would end well.

The guilt rose again.

I had hurt someone badly.

My fault. And now they were coming for me.

Every nerve said: run.

No Coincidence

The accident didn't feel like chance. It was the sum of the life I was leading here.

I no longer felt right in my own skin. Doubt crept in - about my work, my future, my life here.

I was smoking more hash than was good for me.

In social situations I grew quieter, almost shy.

I withdrew, even from friends.

It was as if I had already taken my leave inwardly, without realizing it.

And then this happened.

Life forced me to a brutal standstill - because I didn't want to stop myself.

Abrupt. Violent. Otherwise I wouldn't have seen it.

I realized: this had no future.

I couldn't build a life here.

Not in this job. Not in this world.

I didn't have the strength.

Everything was fleeting.

Friendships, work, relationships.

I was a stranger. And I would always remain one.

Even the English language, which I had once used effortlessly, no longer felt familiar.

My life was held together like loose sand.

I had gone too far. I had hurt someone - permanently.

I felt like crying.

Crete

After the crash something split open in me - and I couldn't stuff it back down. I drifted around like a ghost. The days

rang hollow - the house, the talk, the lot. Something had to give - I had to choose.

But the rig was waiting. No mercy. And oddly, inside that chaos it offered a kind of anchor too: routine, distraction, something to hold on to while I still could.

Shore-side, I felt hemmed in. A pile of lawyer letters lay in the kitchen. Unopened, but unavoidable. I kept pushing it ahead of me, knowing it would catch up.

Staying home would only tighten the knot. So I booked a ticket to Crete. I'd figure it out there - or not. Maybe it was just running.

I told Irish Jim I wasn't sure I'd be back. If I didn't return, he could keep my stuff.

It was spring. I'd been a year offshore. This was when most guys quit: sunshine wakes the itch to move. Foreigners especially - this life was temporary anyway - walked away without fuss.

'Maybe it's my turn,' I thought.

I flew Luton-Heraklion. After passport control I flipped through my passport to kill time, and there it was: a small blue tab, tucked between the last page and the cover.

"Ah, so that's where you were."

I'd been given two hits of LSD; the second had gone missing. Turns out it had been hiding in my passport all along. What if the officer had seen it? Don't go there. This was a nice surprise!

The Trip

I rented a moped and headed for Chania - no one's idea of quick when you top out at about thirty-five an hour.

Dusk as I rolled into town: a cheap room, something to eat on a terrace. Back at the hotel I took the tab. It would

take a while, so I kicked the moped up into the hills above the city.

By then it was dark. I climbed narrow lanes past old houses where people ate outdoors. A small meadow opened with a wide view over Chania. A few houses sat higher up behind me. I propped the moped and lay back in the grass.

It began to work slowly. In the distance I saw the lights of the city transform into the most beautiful shapes and colors. A deep bliss descended over me-as if a vessel of heavenly love were being poured out over me. I felt one with everything and everyone. A gentle, unconditional goodness, not directed at anyone in particular, but at all that exists. Sounds no longer came from outside, but from the same quiet place where I myself was: a barking dog, a moped in the distance-it all fell into a single rhythm. Time stretched; movements became folds in one vast, breathing now.

Then a voice. An older man emerged from the dark and looked me over, plainly wondering what I was doing there alone, at night.

He spoke a language I didn't know, but in my head I understood him perfectly. A conversation unfolded that sounded completely logical - though in reality it probably made no sense at all.

Oddly enough, he found it interesting and sat down beside me. We chatted like two old fellows on a park bench. At the end he asked if I wanted to come to his house, but I declined. I preferred to stay put.

He left, and slowly the magic ebbed. The colours dimmed. Everything became ordinary again - dull, even. I knew I was back on earth. I got on the moped and rode to town.

Near the hotel there was a small parking area where I could leave the moped. I wasn't done yet. The evening was

sultry and alive, and I wanted to have a drink in one of the many little bars in the city center. I wandered through the narrow streets downtown, looking for a suitable pub.

The Wedding

Music spilled from an open door - live, by the sound of it. A long staircase led down. Assuming it was a bar, I descended and ended up in a hall full of people celebrating. I soon realised this wasn't a café but a family party - a wedding.

I turned to go back up. Someone called out. A man waved me over and insisted I join them. I hesitated, not sure I belonged, but he kept at it. I figured I'd sit for a bit. He freed a chair and poured me a glass of wine. Before I knew it, I was in the thick of it.

Women hauled me onto the dance floor. On a small stage, a traditional Greek band - tight, driving, infectious. Sirtaki after sirtaki; impossible to keep still.

With everyone cheering me on, I gave myself over to the music. I was the star of the evening. Meanwhile the wine flowed - light, fruity, treacherously sweet. The kind that tastes like lemonade and tricks you into thinking there's no alcohol, so you keep saying yes. That's where I went wrong.

The Morning After

Then the hammer fell. I've no idea how I got back to the hotel. Morning showed a battlefield: bed, floor, walls - splattered. I cleaned what I could; hopeless. Shame burned, and I couldn't face the landlady. Luckily I'd paid, and my passport was already back in my pocket.

I looked in the mirror and no longer recognized myself.

A pale face, red eyes, an empty stare. *Get out of here.* That was the only thing going through my mind.

I rinsed my clothes as best I could, hung them out the window for a minute, packed my bag, went downstairs, and bolted. I didn't want to stay in Chania. Everything about the place now felt like a blunder I needed to leave behind as quickly as possible.

To the South Coast

After Chania's high and hangover, I needed quiet. No buzz, no wine, no music. I took the moped into the mountains toward the south coast. Halfway - awed by the mass of rock, with stretches barely passable where meltwater had refrozen - I stopped at a tiny hotel around midday.

Cold up there, but inside a big stove roared and the room was soaked in warmth. Locals gathered by the heat, talking at pace.

I took a small table and ordered herbal tea. Watched them from the corner of my eye. It felt like the Himalayas I knew only from photos: weathered faces, thick wool in earth tones, pointed caps. Outside the goats bleated; the jangle of their bells made a timeless mountain-meadow symphony. A world apart. I decided to stay the night.

Down south it was truly warm - about thirty degrees. I spent the rest of my time there. I hopped from place to place - rarely longer than a day - then moved on. There's no road along the coast, so to reach the next village you have to cross the mountains each time.

Part of me loved the landscape and the heat; at the same time the recent past kept gnawing. To be safe, I'd brought all my savings. Everything seemed to point to a farewell, but I still wasn't sure. So I kept the holiday going and

waited to see how I'd respond when the inevitable showed up again.

The Nomad Camp

Halfway through my journey I ended up in a kind of camp, inhabited mainly by Northern Europeans. They lived in tents and small huts. There was an open-air bar where you could eat and drink - serving the same wine as at the wedding celebration. A few hundred meters further on, nestled between steeply rising cliffs, lay a small pebble beach. It was a beautiful, alternative place, ideal for ending my holiday. I rented a hut and mingled with the camp's residents.

They had been there all winter. Life was pleasant - and much cheaper than at home. Most did a stint of work in their own country and could live here for a while on that income. Some made jewellery or other crafts over winter to sell at markets up north. That way of living spoke to me.

It was inspiring to see how central freedom was to them-choosing a nomadic way of living over the programmed routine back home. It opened my eyes. So this was possible. The thought soothed my doubts about what next. Everything felt possible - you just had to do it.

The night before I left I fell into conversation with Gisela, a German woman. She sat by the bar, cheeks fire-red from sun and wine, winding silver wire round a stone. I told her the whole story. The crash. The letters. The doubt. The tension. The uncertainty. That I didn't know whether to go back to the rigs.

She looked at me, smiled, and said: 'I can't decide that for you. Every soul makes its own choices - usually balancing between two fears: the fear of losing something

and the fear of the unknown. Between those fears lies trust - faith, if you prefer. When it's strong, choosing becomes simple. You feel it will be all right. If it's missing, you keep wavering. So my answer would be: first look at how much trust you actually feel, before you decide.'

Good advice. I had to sit with it. I liked to think I had plenty of trust - otherwise I wouldn't keep throwing myself into new adventures. But maybe it wasn't that strong; maybe there was room to grow.

We stayed at the bar - talked, laughed, drank through the night. At first light she was gone. I looked everywhere; nothing. As if she'd come only to say that.

Too Late

Next day I overslept. My flight was at three; it was already after noon. With more than 150 kilometres to the airport, I knew I wouldn't make it. I jolted - and then exhaled. Fate had made the call.

By the time I reached Heraklion, the plane was long gone. No panic, no doubt - just calm. The decision had been made for me. I stepped into a phone box, dialled the company, and said I wouldn't be coming back.

Then I hung up, looked at the sea, and knew: this chapter was over.

SUNRISE IN THE ORIENT

A GENTLE FORCE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

On the Train

Nothing pulled me back home. What I'd left behind was unresolved. I wasn't hunting for answers - only for movement. Turkey drew me in: unknown, mysterious, another world. I opened myself to whatever would come. I took the boat from Heraklion to Athens and from there the train to Istanbul.

At first light the train lurched into motion. The carriages were old - bench seats worn smooth, windows that squealed as they opened, if they opened at all. The compartments carried a smell of old leather braided with cigarette smoke, the scent sunk deep into the upholstery. We rolled slowly through Greece's barren interior, past olive groves, abandoned stations, villages whose walls still wore bullet holes - as if people wanted the scars of a turbulent time to resist oblivion.

The passengers were a mixed lot: labourers, students, country women with shopping bags full of food, and the occasional drifter like me. Not much was said, yet contact

came easily - a glance of recognition, sharing an orange or a cigarette, a nod that said all was well, a brief smile. Quick-to-open hearts.

We stopped often. The train would squeal and creak to a halt at a wayside platform or in a larger town. Then we waited for the conductor's shrill whistle - our cue to move. Outside, the landscape slid past in silence.

Hours of quiet and window-gazing later, one encounter suddenly gave everything depth.

Kostas

In Thessaloniki an older man got on and sat opposite me. He clocked my backpack and struck up a conversation. He introduced himself as Kostas.

'Where's the journey taking you?' he asked in English.

'Istanbul first, and after that I'm not exactly sure,' I said. 'I'll see where I end up.'

'That's a good start,' he said. 'Let yourself be surprised. Learn to trust. The universe will look after you.'

He leaned in a little, nudged his glasses into place, and pinned me for a beat with a keen stare. In the aisle, a slow parade of seat-hunters edged past, though our carriage was full to the last spot. He told me he'd crisscrossed the globe and spent months - sometimes years - living inside starkly different worlds: with an Indigenous tribe in the Amazon, a nomad community on the Mongolian steppe, and among Aboriginal people in Australia. In between, he even taught physics for a few years at the University of Karachi.

Mostly it had been a search for answers to his life's questions. His conclusion was disarmingly simple: every answer calls new questions into being; final answers don't exist. We have to learn to live with the uncertainty of our existence -

who we are, what our destination is. Make peace with our doubts and accept that our knowledge will always be limited.

'That's how it should be,' he said, 'because it isn't knowing but *believing* that gives us our life-force.'

He sat half-caught in the slant of light coming through the carriage window. Grey curls framed his temples, a few unruly hairs springing from his chin. His face carried those fine weather-lines - cut by sun and wind; his eyes were already smiling before his mouth joined in. His jacket was tidy, the elbows rubbed thin, the collar burnished with long use.

'I believe in the connectedness of people,' he went on. 'And I believe our longing to be one is what will shape the future from now on - nothing else. You may think I'm crazy when you look at the world. But the strength of belief lies precisely here: I am the maker of the world, and I decide what it will look like.'

As he spoke, he turned a palm stone in his hand, a perfect fit for his grip. Every so often his gaze slid past the window - not to the scenery but through the glass - as if tracking something waiting farther down the line. By his feet sat a folded canvas bag with a ragged seam and a small, battered thermos.

'But what if you're wrong and reality shows something completely different? What then is your belief worth?' I asked.

'The reality you mean is only one way of looking - complete with its stock images. What's truly happening we cannot know. I fill that gap with my faith. That is my freedom, my creative power. So I can believe that the misery we see is ultimately meant to bring us to insight - and, in the end, to bind us to one another.'

'That takes strength if you can believe that,' I said.

'You're right. Belief is a process: doubt keeps testing it. Only through that trial does it grow strong and become a genuine creative force.'

I fell silent. Maybe this is our path. Maybe this is the life's trial: how strong is our faith?

The carriage swayed softly; dust drifted in the band of light. Somewhere down the aisle, cups chimed. A thin ribbon of smoke held in the compartment; a laugh died away. His words slipped into the rhythm of the tracks and gradually sank deeper and deeper.

'When you arrive and want to explore the city, cross the Bosphorus on foot,' he said. 'Let each step take you closer to your new world - over a bridge that joins East and West.'

Then, in a more poetic register:

'Istanbul, ancient city with many names. Once the battlefield of brothers, each convinced of his own message for unknowing humankind. A message that exposed differences and forgot what we share. Blood flowed freely, but the truth remained untouched. Now there is a bridge that binds them. One more step - and we are across, where many treasures wait in the radiant light of a new morning sun.'

When Kostas got off in Kavala he shook my hand and smiled.

'Keep listening,' he said. 'That matters more than speaking.'

His words kept ringing in me as the old train heaved and snorted back into motion. I stared out the window and saw nothing anymore - only what he had said. It wouldn't let me go. Suddenly everything felt different. Not the outward appearance, but insight - true faith - determines what is true. We are the creators. Paradise just around the corner. I

wondered whether I would ever be able to believe like that.
Then you would truly be free.

Istanbul

At the border, the train was brought to a halt. Passports were collected and the carriages searched. Outside, armed soldiers walked back and forth. After a long wait, the stamp came and we moved on - now into Turkey, the landscape slowly changing. Mountains and hills gave way to vast plains; Orthodox chapels yielded to minarets.

Evening fell somewhere beyond Edirne. Istanbul drew near. In the distance, at last, the glow of a city that rests on two worlds, just as Kostas had pictured it. The train sighed and groaned through the final kilometres - the last heavy stretch. It was late when we arrived. Dusty, sleepy, a little dazed, I stepped out - into a city whose name I knew, and nothing else.

Determined to follow his advice - literally and symbolically - I meant to cross the Bosphorus on foot the next day, step by step. But reality overtook me. Because of the high number of suicides, the pedestrian way had been closed years before.

So I took the bus. From the window I had a sweeping view over one of the world's most strategic waterways. Beneath us slid cargo ships, ferries, yachts, even an oil tanker. Alongside us an endless stream of cars flowed west to east and east to west.

On the far side stretched a landscape of concrete as far as the eye could see. Millions of people packed into stone and cement. On arrival I hit a wall of chaos. Overcrowded transit roads, traffic constantly grinding to a halt. You could hear the frustration in the frantic honking. The air sat heavy

with exhaust fumes. Street vendors - often children - wove through the standstill, hawking goods to drivers: sachets of drinking water, watches, combs, key rings, pens, football stickers.

Overwhelmed by the crush, I left the main road and went looking for a hotel. It took a while to get my bearings and stop looping the same blocks. Eventually, in a district of low-budget places, I found a room. I changed my money on the black market, which gave a better rate than the official one. My Scottish pounds proved awkward - worth the same as English pounds, but not everyone believed it. After some back-and-forth I managed to exchange them anyway.

In the days that followed I explored the area. I drifted through markets and bazaars, along narrow alleys full of small shops and the scent of Eastern spices. In the shade of Byzantine walls, old men bent over traditional board games. Young people in Western clothes, Walkman headphones on, passed me by while big neon signs flared against weathered façades. Everywhere there were places where you could buy alcohol or have a beer. Many women walked the streets unveiled.

At banks and government offices heavily armed guards stood watch. Young soldiers, submachine guns held across their chests, kept silent vigil. The call to prayer braided itself with the thunder of traffic and the cries of market traders, while minarets pointed their sharp stone fingers toward the sky. And behind it all, the Bosphorus - a pocket of quiet when the frenzy grew too much.

Among all these impressions one place stood out at once. I'd already seen her from the bridge: the Blue Mosque, set high on a hill above the city. A majestic structure from the early seventeenth century, with the blue tiling that gave

her its name. When I stepped inside, a deep calm washed over me. As if God reached out a hand.

Encounters in a City Between Two Worlds

I ate out most days. It was cheap, and Turkish cooking suited me. Some evenings I'd roam whole districts hunting for a tucked-away place. One night in a café I fell in with a group of Turkish students. They were keen to talk with Westerners. They all spoke English, and we covered everything: religion, politics, women, sex, sport. The café had a reputation among travellers, and we ended up meeting there almost daily.

Back home people tend to imagine Turkey as a dictatorship; I didn't feel much of that. My Turkish friends had no shortage of criticism for their government - but that's hardly different where I'm from. They were progressive, West-facing, hungry for change.

One of them, Burak, studied law - a mane of curls and even bigger self-belief. He ordered raki as if it were water and had takes on everything from the Ottoman Empire to European women. ‘

Turkey's a teenager,’ he said. ‘Torn between tradition and freedom, trying to figure itself out. Always in conflict. Same as me.’

He talked fast and hot, then could go quiet in a heartbeat, staring out the window as if something had slipped his grasp.

Another was Emre, a philosophy student. He chain-smoked, took his tea with three sugar cubes, and swore every good conversation should start with a joke.

‘I want to understand the world,’ he told me one night,

'but only if it's willing to meet me halfway. Until then - improvise.'

He loved Western literature. Cioran was a genius, Nietzsche 'wildly overrated', and he owned three copies of Camus' *L'Étranger* - one in Turkish, 'for my mother, if she ever wants to know why I'm like this.'

Burak, Emre, and a couple of others took me and another backpacker to dinner at a restaurant on the Bosphorus. It felt like being out in nature, far from the city's racket. Before we sat down, we walked a while along the water. The villas of the rich stood quiet among lush trees, looking out over the Bosphorus and, in the distance, the Golden Horn.

They wouldn't hear of us paying. Treating us was a point of honour. The place was pricey, but they went the whole way: several courses, wine, raki - the lot.

That kind of generosity - from people who barely knew us - hit me. For the first time I grasped what Turkish hospitality really meant: lavish, warm, unconditional. As if we'd been friends for years. That night I didn't feel like a passer-through anymore; I felt welcomed by a country that opened its doors as if it were the most natural thing.

When we said our goodbyes, Emre handed me a small scrap with a line from *Rumi*. "For the road," he said. '*Because the road matters more than the destination - especially when you get lost.*'

Towards the Mediterranean Sea

About a week later I took the train to Ankara. It crawled - more than twelve hours for roughly 450 kilometres. I didn't want to put another stretch into a big city, so I pushed on the same day.

I had no real plan. Restlessness drove me more than anything. What I'd left behind still flickered through my mind. Simply moving - being in transit - kept it at bay.

I was curious about hitchhiking here and stuck out my thumb towards the south - the Anatolian coast. Rides came quickly, but driving in Turkey was another species altogether: passing where there was no room to pass; cars and lorries blasting by with horns blaring, barely squeezing through. Drivers swerved onto the shoulder to avoid oncoming overtakers.

Again and again you saw trucks off the road or tipped on their sides. Almost every car wore dents, and by Western standards many vehicles were well past the scrapheap. The roads, too, were hit-or-miss: fine in stretches, then pocked with potholes and cracks.

Mehmet's Truck

On a dusty forecourt a fire-engine-red lorry ground to a halt - crammed to the rafters with chickens boxed into stacked crates. A cackling, flapping orchestra on wheels. The door sighed open. Mehmet stood there: big, broad, grinning. He waved me in. I climbed aboard.

On the road he burned one cigarette off the next, as if his lungs needed to keep pace with his engine.

He was in his forties, and everything about him was large: head, nose, body, hands, feet. A thick thatch of hair and a beard finished the picture. His voice was a bass that made the cab hum. He was always doing something at the wheel - eating, drinking, working the radio. If a song hit him right, he boomed along, slapped time on his thighs or the dashboard, and whistled off-key for good measure. Each time he overtook - even on blind bends - he shouted "*Bismil-*

lah!" and laughed like a man who thinks life is a joke best not taken too seriously.

He decided I wasn't eating enough, pulled into a roadside place, and insisted on a lamb dürüm for me. 'Get strong!' he said, tapping his biceps - impressive, no question.

At the station where we parted he pressed a packet of biscuits into my hand. "For the road," he winked. 'And sing more. Good for the heart.'

Across Anatolia

After Mehmet dropped me off, the landscape stayed with me: dusty, unhurried, old. The villages we'd passed felt stalled in time. Children chased us laughing and yelling, rolling old bicycle rims. Elderly men sat in the shade with little glasses of tea and hats on their heads. Sometimes they waved; sometimes they just watched.

The air was dry and bright. Heat wavered above the asphalt in the distance. Rolling hills gave way to bare plains where the sun beat down without mercy. Mountains gathered like ghosts on the horizon. In that vast, rugged country I felt small. An old land with a soul. The foundations of the civilisations that shaped the world lay here.

I usually got dropped at petrol stations after a ride. They were tiny oases - meeting points scented with grilled meat and diesel. Boys sold watermelons from the boot of a beat-up car. A tinny car radio pushed out Turkish folk tunes. Roadside stalls offered fruit and vegetables, pottery, clothes. Simple eateries under open sky, a little bar in a concrete block. Prostitutes drifted about - unobtrusive, folded into the crowd. The regulars knew exactly whom to approach.

Evenings stayed lively - often the only place for miles with anything going on. Finding a lift wasn't hard, even after

dark. I talked to people; they usually knew who was headed where, and I could ask for a seat.

I preferred to travel by day, to take in the wide views and the endlessly shifting landscape. It wasn't only the vistas I loved, but the people: open, kind, hospitable.

In Silifke, on the Mediterranean, I followed the coast road west. Springtime; no tourists yet. In towns and villages I kept an eye out for interesting people. Often I'd meet someone - or a small group - and we'd fall into easy company. If not, I moved on. Nights I mostly slept on the beach.

After a week along the coast I reached Marmaris and stuck around. It felt more international - there was a bar where young people from all over Europe gathered. The weather was glorious, and in the evenings we sat on the quay outside the café, talking and trading philosophies. Thoughts of Scotland faded to the background. It was the right call. I didn't miss my old life for a second. I was content here.

Kostas's words returned: learn to trust. For the first time I felt no urge to push on. Not because the journey was over, but because, for a while, there was nothing I needed to find. Inside me, it was quiet.

Work by the Bay

Marmaris had calmed me, but after a week I felt my curiosity beginning to stir again. I heard about Datça - a quiet village on a peninsula, with a deep bay, set in beautiful surroundings, secluded and self-contained. It sounded like a place that was waiting for me. So I went.

When I arrived, the village was hushed. There were barely any people in the streets. Down at the harbour, along

the bay, there was a little more movement. I walked past the berthed yachts and watched small fish slip through the clear water between the boats.

On one of the yachts a sun-brown woman stood on deck wrestling a sail line. I stopped, considered lending a hand, but at that moment she freed it herself. She turned her head towards me as if she felt my eyes on her. I nodded, lifted a hand in greeting, and moved on.

The beach was just as quiet.

Back in the village, I walked past a restaurant. Outside, a man was smoking. He greeted in German - surprising, as he didn't look particularly German. We fell into conversation. He told me he had worked in Germany for years and asked what I was doing here.

'I'm not exactly sure,' I said. 'Someone recommended it. Beautiful place, from the looks of it - just very quiet.'

He introduced himself as Ökan.

'Come inside - let's have a drink.'

He took two cans from the fridge and we sat down at a table. The place was empty; officially they weren't open yet. A little later his colleague, Urkun, joined us. He too had worked in Germany for years and spoke fluent German, though he mostly let Ökan do the talking.

Ökan was the cook. Tall, slender, mid-forties, and radiating calm. With him I had a feeling of coming home. The respect in his manner, the warmth that was almost fatherly, and the language that, for a border-lander like me, sounded so familiar - together they put me instantly at ease.

We got on well and spent a lot of time together over the next few days. Towards evening he went on shift. The first nights I slept in a small hotel. After a few days he asked whether I might like to work at the restaurant. He'd already

cleared it with the boss - permission granted. A fine surprise. I was keen - and the next day I started.

I worked the floor and quickly learned the trade's fine points: how to carry several plates at once, dress a table neatly, top up in time, and clear with a smooth hand. The house speciality was seafood - lobster above all.

I earned almost nothing, but it didn't matter. We were looked after. Staff ate for free every day, and at night we slept on the restaurant floor.

Ilmit, the owner, didn't speak German, so I communicated with him in English. He was in his mid-thirties and openly gay - something that, in a small Turkish community, was at the very least noteworthy.

Most customers were Turks. You rarely saw foreigners. Which is why I soon became a curiosity in the village - a young West European working in a Turkish restaurant; it piqued people's interest. The boss used that smartly by putting me on his best tables. I knew I was being played as a bit of a trump card, and I didn't mind.

After weeks on the road, Datça felt like a place where I was allowed to stay. I didn't have to go anywhere. There was calm, rhythm, work.

Family Visit

Summer had begun and the restaurant kept getting busier. More European tourists arrived as well. The harbour filled with yachts and the beach was well occupied by day. I liked the work, and the atmosphere in the restaurant was relaxed and welcoming. The location helped: right on the sea, close to the harbour. Visitors stepped straight from their boats onto the terrace.

Much as I loved the restaurant's rhythm, now and then

something was missing - most of all when loneliness set in and I ached to hear my mother's voice. Calling wasn't straightforward. There was no direct connection; everything went through exchanges, with long waits - if it worked at all.

When I spoke to her again, she said that she and my father would like to come and visit. It lifted me; the thought of seeing my family soon felt like a gift.

Planning the trip wasn't easy - there were no flights into this part of Turkey. Routing through Istanbul was possible, but they would still be traveling one to two days to reach Datça. We decided I'd figure out the best route.

Rhodes looked most practical: they could fly there directly and from there take the boat to Marmaris. I called them back to explain how they could get here most easily. My father said that Marleen and Frans Marsman would come too - if that worked for me. Of course.

But when they arrived on Rhodes, they were told there was no boat to Turkey. My mother panicked at the thought she wouldn't be able to see me. It rattled them. Only after asking around a lot did they discover there was in fact a ferry, run by a Turkish operator. Because of the animosity between Greeks and Turks they'd been misinformed at first.

They arrived in Datça later that same day - relieved and safe.

The reunion was warm, and they were smitten with the place right away. My father and Frans were fascinated by the small-scale economy: little shops and artisan outfits everywhere. Most food was local; the sea supplied fish and shellfish in abundance.

For my father this was the ideal made visible: back to simplicity. No big companies pushing products from afar, but people providing for their own needs. Here he saw the blueprint of the society he dreamed of.

Frans was an old friend of my father's. In the seventies they had founded the Biological Association together - he as chair, my father as treasurer. He lived alone now and had come along for a change of scene.

He painted a village scene now and then, but he preferred to talk. He could go on for hours; the weather and nature were his regular subjects. He published several books on organic gardening and toured the country giving lectures. He believed in small scale, warned against monoculture, and saw signs everywhere of rapidly declining biodiversity. Here in Turkey as well, he felt, people needed to hear his message.

His handicap was languages: he didn't speak any. If he launched into a talk among locals, he'd ask me to render it in German. It held until he got carried away by his own story. Then he'd stop waiting for the translation - afraid of breaking his flow - and push on in a single breath, almost trance-like. The message he so passionately wanted to convey drifted off and was lost somewhere among the stars. No one understood anymore what he was talking about.

Even so, having Frans around made for plenty of lively, testing moments. In town we were a noticeable little band and drew more than the usual share of looks from the locals. I gave myself permission to spend a lot of time with them. While they were visiting I didn't work at the restaurant - the boss was fine with it - so time was mine. I spent most of it with Marleen. She'd been my rock when things at home were rough. It felt good having her there. Unlike in Aberdeen, there were no reservations this time.

My parents largely followed their own programme with Frans. Most nights we all ate together - either at their hotel or somewhere nearby. In that set-up my father and I hardly rubbed at all. It was holiday pace, lots to occupy us, and we

weren't crowded together or weighed down by fixed expectations. For their whole stay, not a harsh word passed between us.

Those weeks were suffused with a gentle calm. And there were places that seemed made for it - like the sulphur bath, a natural spring just outside the village. From the source, sulphurous water flowed into a large basin - ideal for people with skin problems. My sister had suffered from eczema since childhood, and this water made her skin beautifully smooth again. The warm sulphur water felt like a blanket - as if it cleansed not only our skin but something deeper as well: the restlessness, the homesickness. Sometimes we soaked for hours while thick eels slid along the bottom and gently nibbled our toes. Sadly, they were inedible, because of the high sulphur content.

We spent most of our time on the beach, broken up with bus trips to nearby places. Ökan often joined us. With his German he could make himself understood easily. I loved spending time with my family like that, and they visibly enjoyed this beautiful country and its friendly people.

After they left, I picked up my work at the restaurant again.

Social Life

The restaurant was humming. High season meant seven days a week - this was when the boss made his money. I slowly began to pick up some Turkish, which the Turkish guests greatly appreciated. It felt as if I might never leave. I had already had my visa extended once.

By then I was part of a little circle, mostly young people. We saw each other almost daily - on the beach or in the village cafés - a colourful mix of Turks and foreigners. The

line-up kept shifting, depending on who joined and who moved on to their next stop. That transience kept the group open and lively - new, interesting people kept appearing with their own stories and views.

I had a brief romance with a Danish girl. She was travelling on a boat with her parents and little brother. Because my shifts often ran until midnight, evenings were off-limits. I was free during the day, and we went out together, looking for quiet spots by the water or in the shade of the pines. It ended when she sailed on with her family along the coast, heading east. She said she'd send me a postcard, but I never heard from her again.

Although I could talk with my Turkish friends about almost anything, one subject was touchy: the Kurds. Some even claimed there were no Kurds living in Turkey at all - let alone that there was any problem. If I referred to Western reporting anyway, they tended to deny it and preferred to drop the subject.

Act of Defiance

Not every rebellion starts with big words - sometimes it starts with a lobster in the pot.

It wasn't all sweetness and light at the restaurant. Ökan and Urkun felt they were being underpaid. On a sultry night I could feel the tension in the kitchen. Ökan slammed the fridge shut.

'Does he think we'll swallow everything?'

Urkun nodded.

They said little, but their looks said enough. That night they took action. They'd had enough. Without permission they pulled every lobster from the freezer. One by one they

went into the pot. ‘Tonight we cook only for ourselves,’ said Ökan.

We ate in silence, shoulder to shoulder, knowing this would have consequences.

The boss had no idea. He slept elsewhere and never came by at night.

The next day there were no lobsters left, so none could be served that evening. A heavy loss, especially in high season. Ilmit asked what had happened. Ökan told him straight what they’d done.

He wasn’t happy, of course, but there wasn’t much he could do. Finding new staff at short notice wasn’t an option - certainly not when it came to a good cook like Ökan. He gave in and promised to pay them more. That same day he drove to Marmaris to buy fresh lobsters.

God in the Conscience

Now and then I talked faith with Ökan. He was Muslim and, from what he’d seen and gone through in Germany, he felt there was, at bottom, very little that truly separated Christianity and Islam. For him, faith lived first in the conscience.

One afternoon in the restaurant he put words to it.

He set down his tea and looked at me with a gaze that hovered between gravity and gentleness. ‘Deep inside,’ he said slowly, ‘we know exactly what’s good and what’s evil. Your conscience whispers it. That’s true for everyone, whatever creed you hold. God speaks through our conscience. For example: the thing that stops you from approaching a girl against her will - that’s God.’

‘In this way we can also follow the path of what is good. We don’t need thick books or elaborate doctrines for that. Being honest with yourself and staying close to your feel-

ings - that's where you learn the most. Evil and good, falsehood and truth cannot dwell in the same heart at the same time. With your mind you come to know them both, but in your heart only one of them can serve as the foundation of your life.'

'No grand words, but daring to be small and listening to your heart,' he added, 'then you will know enough.'

The Snack Bar in Marmaris

The boss had plans for me. He wanted to expand and had recently opened a snack bar in Marmaris. I was to run it together with someone else. A share of the takings would be mine - finally I'd earn some money.

At first the offer sounded attractive. But it would mean being in Marmaris all week while Ökan stayed in Datça. I gave it a try, and almost at once I missed the camaraderie of my crew. Moreover, I realized that this work didn't suit me.

The responsibility was greater, sure, but mostly it was the atmosphere and the setting that put me off. In the restaurant I could truly look after people, and it sat in a beautiful spot by the sea. In Marmaris I was penned in by half-built concrete shells, sliding snacks over a counter to whoever walked up. No atmosphere, no warmth.

The days in Marmaris dragged by. I felt estranged from myself there, and in my head I kept drifting back to Datça. It sank in: this wasn't where I wanted to stay.

After a week I told the boss I wanted to quit. He tried to talk me round - be patient, he said. Marmaris was growing at speed and tourism would turn it into a goldmine in time. I wasn't thinking that far ahead. Going back to Datça, he said, wasn't an option - he wanted to overhaul the whole operation. What, exactly, he had in mind I never learned. Maybe

something had flared up with Ökan and Urkun, or the pay dispute hadn't truly been settled. Maybe I simply no longer fit in. I had no idea.

After nearly four months, I knew it was time to move on. I went back to Datça once more to say goodbye to the people there, and especially to Ökan. He drove me to Marmaris and told me on the way that he wanted out as well - maybe even a return to Germany. He had no wish to keep working for a pittance.

We said our goodbyes and I thanked him for all he'd done for me. As I walked away and we raised our hands to each other one last time, he called after me: "Don't let yourself be fooled. *God is in all of us.*"

Forgotten Paradise

Just outside Marmaris I set off on a long walk along dirt roads and footpaths through hilly, wooded country. The land was parched and baked - it hadn't rained for months. The scrub was hard and thorny. Every so often a snake curled over the track: sometimes a thick black one, then a small green one people said was the most dangerous. The sun burned fiercely and I kept ducking into shade to catch my breath.

Sometimes I got a lift out of the blue. I'd rattle along on a cart behind a tractor over rock-strewn lanes, or a car would stop and take me a stretch farther. Where to? I had no plan - I just drifted and watched where I'd end up. By then I could hold a simple conversation in Turkish, which meant I could trade a few words with locals as well. But often, as soon as I said a line or two, they assumed I understood everything. Then they'd rattle on and I couldn't make head nor tail of it.

Here and there small lakes lay tucked into the woods. Once, when I went in for a cooling swim and was properly under water, a water snake flashed right past my face. It scared me witless and I shot to the surface. There I watched it skim away across the skin of the water.

Who knew how many snakes were in there, I thought. In any case, my plan to swim was cured in a hurry.

On the road a walker came by and I told him what I'd seen. No need to worry, he said - water snakes are harmless. Easy for him to say; I wasn't about to try again.

Toward evening I came into a valley hemmed in by wooded hills that ran all the way down to the open sea. The late sun threw long shadows over the still bay. A broad sand beach drew a clean line between land and water. The unspoilt beauty stunned me. It felt as if I'd stepped into *a forgotten paradise*.

On the flat lay a single small building - a restaurant, or something that passed for one - and otherwise nothing. A few people were about. I asked if I could pitch my tent. In Datça I'd bought a tent from a private seller for far too much money; later it turned out to leak like a sieve. It hardly mattered - this time of year there was no rain anyway. The owner pointed to the beach which, apart from a few boats hauled up on the sand, lay completely empty. I could put up my tent there.

"How can a place this beautiful not pull in more tourists?" I wondered.

But I had thought that too quickly. The tourists who came here usually arrived by boat. There weren't many of them, and often I had the beach to myself. In the days that followed, luxury and less luxurious yachts regularly lay at anchor in the bay.

Spearfishing with Ilay

There was a young man named Ilay who kept a boat on the beach. He ferried tourists to Dalyan, the town just around the bend. Beyond its lovely setting Dalyan had been famous, for as long as anyone could remember, for its fish dishes.

Ilay had lived in Austria for years and spoke flawless German with a soft Austrian lilt. He was a few years older than I was. Something in his stern gaze and short, sturdy build naturally commanded respect. He wasn't there every day, but when he came, we were usually together. I was welcome to ride along on the tourist trips he organised and help with small chores when needed.

When there was little to do, we went out to sea together. The shallow water was ideal for diving, with a wide variety of fish and plants. Ilay taught me how to use a harpoon.

Catching fish turned out to be anything but simple. The first attempts I missed without fail. Light plays tricks under water. What you see shifts: when a fish looks to be right in front of you, in reality it's already been there. That makes aiming tricky - you have to shoot ahead of it - or just behind, depending on the angle.

Ilay had the feel for it. Easier by far was to pluck octopuses from between the rocks - provided I managed to find them at all. They barely moved and made easy prey.

I grew to love it: taking your food straight from nature. Primitive in the best sense, and deeply satisfying. As often as we could, Ilay and I would dive for our supper. In the evenings we roasted the fish over a fire and ate them with bread and wine, content as kings.

A World School on a Yacht

The bay had a way of drawing unusual people. Now and then boats would tie up - tourists, travellers, people who in their own way were looking for simplicity. One of them was a Dutch family on a sailing yacht. They were three: father, mother, and daughter, circling the globe under sail. The girl was a teenager and, strictly speaking, ought to have been in school. But her father, Ruud, believed she learnt far more like this. Her mother, Marijke, was a teacher and supplied the necessary theory - useful if the girl later decided to go to university after all. The idea appealed to me too, that way of learning. Maybe, if I'd had something like it, things would have gone differently for me.

Ruud had sold his business in North Holland. He said he was done with life in the Netherlands. He had bought the yacht with the proceeds. In winter they headed for the Caribbean; in summer they generally came to these waters. In Ekincik, as this place was called, they would return whenever they were nearby. Turkey, he said, was his favourite destination. He had known Ilay for some time and admired the way he ran things. Ilay didn't work on his own but belonged to a collective of skippers who pooled their takings and shared the income.

'That never worked for me,' Ruud said. He had once tried to organise something similar with his competitors on the IJsselmeer, where they too took tourists out. But the mindset wasn't there. They preferred to compete one another into the ground than to put something together. That, precisely, was why he valued what Ilay had built.

Scorpions

On a blistering afternoon I walked back to my tent to grab my towel. I unzipped the flap without thinking - and watched in surprise as the groundsheet billowed up and down. When I lifted it, the space beneath was alive with translucent, pale-yellow scorpions. Startled, I ran to the restaurant and told the chef what I'd seen.

'What am I supposed to do about that?' I asked him.

'When the sun's down, they'll be gone again,' he said, deadpan.

'They're only after shade.'

He was right: by the time I turned in, not a scorpion in sight. But the next afternoon they were back. They had clearly found their place.

Temptation

One evening the chef invited me for a drink. Some guests had dropped by who wanted to meet me. At the long table on the veranda sat a man and a striking woman in her thirties with a thick mane of black curls - they looked like a couple. I took a seat opposite and waited to see where this was headed.

They already had drinks. The boss set a glass of cola in front of me. Most of the talking flowed between the three of them. No one much looked my way, and I wasn't sure why I'd been asked along, until the chef nudged me to make contact with the woman. It felt odd - especially in a country where you learn to be cautious around women.

Something was off. Slowly it clicked: the woman was a prostitute, and the man was her pimp. Plainly, I was the project. I didn't know what to do with that. Every so often

she sent a smile my way, while the men, or so it felt, made a little sport of me.

She wasn't crude - far from it. She drew me in with tact and finesse. Everything about her felt like an invitation. Most of all the loose breasts under her blouse, which she kept angling so that my imagination ran riot. I was too shy to start a conversation. She chose a different approach.

Eyes locked on mine, a half-smile playing at the corners. Tiny, beckoning lifts of the eyebrows followed. Fingers combed her hair; her head fell back, her chest lifting - *I'm here- for you*. A small insect landed; with a lazy flick she brushed it from her blouse, her hand drifting along the curve of a breast as if it were mine.

In the end I was so wound up I couldn't sit there any longer. I muttered to the chef that I needed the toilet and hurried out into the field. Two touches, and the release came; at last the tension drained away.

Back at the restaurant the scene snapped back into focus. I realised I had no business being there. I apologised to the chef and his guests and walked down to the beach.

I felt a bit used - as if I'd been a piece in someone's little game. There was something disrespectful in it. At the same time I wondered whether I shouldn't take it more lightly. Maybe this was just their way of testing people, a kind of macho humour. Either way, I was relieved I hadn't gone along. I had kept my dignity.

Visa

Even paradise runs out. The urge to move on returned and grew stronger. My plan was to reach Israel via Syria and Jordan. For that I had to go back to Istanbul, because visas

for those first two countries could be obtained only there or in Ankara. Time to get moving.

Ilay and I said our goodbyes, and I took the bus back to Istanbul. Each place, I realised, had given me something different. In Istanbul: the warm welcome. On the long road through the country: the sense of age-old civilisations that had impressed themselves on humanity. In Datça: the feeling of connection. And in Ekincik: the silence, the beauty, and the simplicity of life.

At the Syrian consulate it turned out I could only get a three-day transit visa. The man behind the window asked where I was headed afterwards.

'Via Jordan to Israel,' I said.

He told me to write it down and slid a sheet towards me. When I handed the note back, he looked up, angry.

'No visa.'

'Why not?' I asked, taken aback.

'You are going to Israel, then you don't get a visa for Syria.'

What a bastard, I thought. He'd made me write it down on purpose - so he'd have proof. I felt set up. One thing, at least, was clear: the hatred between those two peoples ran deep.

One of the bystanders, a foreigner, had heard the whole exchange. As I turned to go, he called me back.

'There's another option,' he said. 'But you'll have to go to the Syrian consulate in Ankara and apply there again.'

Good tip. I left the same day. In Ankara I didn't make the same mistake. I got the transit visa. A little further on, in the embassy quarter, I also picked up a visa for Jordan. No problems there, and they even gave me three months.

With both visas in my pocket I could finally breathe. It was done. On my way back to the city, something caught my

eye: a long queue of men outside the Saudi embassy. Dozens of them. I asked what was going on.

"Applying for a work permit for Saudi Arabia," someone said.

For a moment I pictured joining the queue. Work in a country you'd otherwise never see - I was curious. But I let the impulse go and moved on again, towards the coast.

Atatürk and the West

I worked my way along the coast, hopping from one resort town to the next - eastbound this time. Nights I slept on the beach; days I ate in little places: beans in a hot sauce with Turkish bread, fish, and a Mediterranean salad - my favourite. While I was sitting on a terrace eating, a man struck up a conversation. He seemed friendly, and I invited him to pull up a chair. I told him how many statues of Atatürk I'd noticed across the country.

'What kind of man was he, and why is he revered like that?' I asked.

He explained that Atatürk was the founder of modern Turkey. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire he realised the country lagged the West in many fields. He pushed through sweeping reforms: a separation of religion and state, a new legal system, and the Roman alphabet. In that way he led the country into a new era.

'Most Turks are still grateful to him for that,' he said.

He added, though, that a true docking with the Western world never really happened. Turkey has been striving for years to join the European Union, but progress seems slow. Some wonder whether it will ever come to pass.

The Priest of Samandağ

As I drew closer to Syria, I wanted to swim in the sea one last time before leaving the country. In Antioch I heard about a place on the coast not far from there: Samandağ.

The beach was a let-down: a broad, muddy expanse bristling with upright wooden poles, some metres high. Scattered between them stood a few huts - also on stilts. What any of it was for I couldn't discover; what was clear was that this was no place for beach fun. Disappointed, I turned back toward town.

On a little square I noticed a priest in a black cassock. A Christian padre - something I hadn't yet seen in Turkey. Curious, I fell in step behind him. When he realised I was following, he stopped. I introduced myself and said it struck me to meet a priest here.

'You're the first,' I said.

He smiled, a little surprised, and shook my hand. He led a small parish with its own church and asked if I felt like walking along. His name was Antonio, an Italian. As we went he told me about the history of the region.

'Here you can still find traces of the early Christian faith that blossomed in the first centuries after Christ. Antioch was an important community in the early church. The word "*Christians*" was first used here. Paul and Barnabas both spent time in this community.'

I asked whether he didn't regret that the cradle of Christianity was now home mostly to Muslims. He smiled. 'That isn't for me to judge. My task isn't to convert. So long as people treat one another with respect and live together in peace, there's no problem. "*Love God above all, and your neighbour as yourself*" - that's the core. And you can share it

with everyone, including Muslims. At bottom they believe the same.'

It sounded like a brief homily. I had rarely heard Christ's message put so plainly.

'Is it really that simple? I asked. 'Could all religions find themselves in that?'

"In fact, it applies even to people who do not believe in God. Anyone who loves their neighbor also shows love for the Creator - consciously or unconsciously. To God, that makes no difference. Love is love. And that is what pleases Him most."

By then we had reached the church: a small Gothic building with a square tower and a cross on top. Inside was a familiar sight - the altar on a raised platform, Jesus on the cross behind it; the Stations of the Cross along the walls; rows of weathered wooden pews flanking the central aisle.

I hadn't set foot in a church in years, nor felt the need, yet the scene felt familiar - and that did me good. Something steady, a beacon through time. Though I also knew: the true beacon isn't the stone building but the simple message of Christ.

He asked if I would write something in his guest book. At first I held back, mostly because I didn't know what to say. Then I set that aside and wrote: '*We are all children of God.*'

Crossing into Syria

After speaking with Antonio I stayed one more day in Samandağ. Then I shouldered my pack and walked back to the highway to thumb a ride toward Syria. Hans, an Austrian truck driver bound for Saudi Arabia, took me aboard. Near the Syrian border dozens of trucks were

already parked in line; over the next hours more kept arriving. Only the following day were we allowed to move on.

'Tomorrow we all drive in convoy,' Hans said.

'We had to assemble here first.'

He had driven this route for years and would be six weeks out from home.

'My marriage is still intact,' he added with a grin. 'That's rare among long-haul drivers.'

Children under the Trucks

That night I slept on top of the trailer's tarpaulin. In the morning Hans had to report to customs with his papers, and I went along for passport and visa control. A few hours later we crawled across the border. In Syria they directed us onto a huge parking field and stopped us again. By then more than a hundred foreign rigs stood on a dry, dusty plain. The sun beat down mercilessly. Children huddled for coolness in the shade under the trailers.

Now and then a truck pulled out without anyone checking if there were kids beneath it. I went to the yard boss who was waving trucks into place and asked whether that wasn't deadly dangerous - some children were asleep against the tyres. One wrong move and it could end fatally.

He shrugged.

'Five dead last week,' he said, as if it were nothing.

'Then why don't you do anything?' I asked as evenly as I could, while anger boiled in me.

'The children have to look out for themselves.'

I could hardly believe my ears. I knew I had to let it go, but my heart kept pounding with rage. 'There are so many children here, and so many trucks,' he went on.

'Parents should keep them away. We can't watch everywhere at once.'

It felt as if a child's life here weighed no more than dust under the wheels. When I asked Hans, he nodded.

'Happens often - kids under the wheels. Different world,' he said flatly.

The farther east I traveled, the less automatic the value of a human life seemed to be.

Convoy

Once everyone had fuel on board, we rolled out toward Homs in convoy, army vehicles front and rear. We weren't allowed to turn off and could stop only on command. There was no pace to speak of. In a long ribbon we crept over the asphalt, straight through the empty, sandy country. Heat trembled in the air; the sun flashed off metal and glass on hundreds of trucks.

Conversations, Stifled

I found it hard going with Hans. Long silences opened in which I wanted to say something but nothing came. I could barely scare up topics. With the prospect of being thrown together for hours yet, I grew uncomfortable. It just didn't click - sometimes it doesn't. He probably felt the same. It made me unsure of myself. Was it me? Too tired to bring a little lightness? My thoughts ran everywhere, but the moment I tried to speak, something jammed. Little came from Hans either. So we let the silence stand, awkward as it was. There was nothing else for it.

Damascus in Evening Light

After a full day on the road we stopped for the first time - in Damascus. I was curious: this was said to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Here, on the road to Damascus, Paul had seen the Light, come to know Christ, and later became the great inspirer of the first Christian communities - like the one in Antioch. I thought back to the priest from Samandağ who had put Christ's core message in such simple words.

Evening lay over Damascus like a veil. In the narrow alleys of the old city the first lanterns flickered to life, their glow soft on weather-worn stone. The muezzin's sing-song drifted across streets and squares. Little shops stayed open, washed in yellowish light. From an open courtyard came the clink of dishes. A warm breeze moved through the lanes carrying the smell of charred charcoal. Beggars thrust out twisted hands and mumbled words I couldn't catch. Small children, barefoot and in threadbare clothes, swarmed around asking for *money*. A woman in a burqa walked ahead of me for a while with a bag full of loaves. A uniformed officer beckoned me over. He asked whether I wanted to change dollars. I declined and walked on.

A Voice from the Cellar

In a lane with little shops on both sides, a man suddenly came up from a cellar stair. He seized my arm, looked at me in desperation, and said in broken English: '*I am Christian. You cannot live in this country as a Christian.*'

The sudden grip startled me, but I saw his despair. He tried to explain how hard it was to live here as a Christian, but his English failed him and I could scarcely follow. What

I did grasp was that he did not feel free. It surprised me - Syria was considered one of the few countries in the region with religious freedom. Yet he sounded sincere and was visibly shaken.

'Maybe practice is different from paper,' I thought.

There was nothing I could do for him. Lost in thought, I walked back to the truck.

His words stayed with me, even though I wasn't sure what to make of them. But they touched something - something I had no words for.

The next day we reached the Jordanian border. There Hans and I parted - much to the relief of us both.

Jordan

In Jordan the trucks no longer had to run in convoy; everyone could follow his own route. I headed to Amman first and from there hitched rides toward Aqaba. After a string of short lifts I was picked up by a trucker hauling an oil tanker.

He'd plainly been on the road a long time. The fatigue was written on his face. Every so often his head sank forward, as if sleep were about to take him. Then he'd jolt awake, snap his head up, stare hard ahead for a while - until, nodding, he yielded again to gravity.

In those drowsy spells we sometimes drifted off the roadway. He'd bolt upright, size up the situation in a heartbeat, and steer back. I tried to keep him awake by talking. He had a bit of English, which helped.

He told me he'd come straight out of Iraq, hauling oil to the port of Aqaba. Because of economic sanctions, Iraq couldn't sell its oil directly on the world market. So tankers shuttled between the northern Iraqi fields and the

Jordanian port. There the oil was pumped into seagoing tankers and resold under third-party names. The run took about twenty-four hours - and my driver had been at the wheel almost that long.

We pulled into a sandy roadside café with a petrol pump to eat and rest. A dry desert wind swept across the yard while the sun beat down without mercy. Unlike Turkey there wasn't much to see here. No market stalls, no food stands.

The driver insisted on paying for my meal. I said he didn't need to, but pushing back was pointless. For him it was about honour: I was his guest - and therefore his responsibility. Period.

Whisky from India

After I'd eaten I wandered around outside. The driver had stayed in; he was stretched out on one of the benches. Four men around thirty hailed me. They shouted something I couldn't make out. A moment later I realised they were saying 'whisky'. Did I want some? They led me to a shed a little way down the road. Their movements gave them away - they were drunk. Proudly they showed off a stack of dozens of full cases. One of them held a bottle aloft and slurred, 'India. Whisky, from India.'

I said I wasn't interested. Then I really looked at them - bloodshot eyes, swollen faces, any original features blurred away. The men were their own best customers. Vacantly they stared at me. They kept touting their goods, swaying, sweating - it was painful to see.

I went back to the restaurant without a word. My guy had perked up again. In the cab I told him about the whisky.
'Oh, contraband,' he said.

I thought to myself: they do as they please here too - *faith or no faith.*

Hitchhikers

Jordan felt rougher, more direct. Not only because of the empty, barren landscape, but also the way people looked at you. As I'd already noticed in Turkey, expectations around hitchhikers are different here. People weren't always by the roadside for the same reason I was. Sometimes cars went by and the occupants made obscene gestures. Now and then I was picked up by someone who, en route, tried to make a move. Here in Jordan it happened far more often than in Turkey, and it was intensely irritating.

When I nodded off and my driver tried to grope me, I confronted him on the spot: "Why does this happen so often here?"

I told him he wasn't the first - that I'd been harassed repeatedly. I was fed up. He took the point.

He said, 'In this country a lot of men have a big problem. They can't marry. To marry, you have to bring a bride price. Bride prices are high and for poor men usually out of reach. They're left out. To meet their sexual needs anyway, they help each other.'

'Are you saying many men here are bisexual?'

He took his hands off the wheel, lifted them, and made a gesture that the judgement was mine.

Caught on the Beach

I got dropped off in Aqaba. There I ran into Harold - an American about my age, a backpacker roaming the country much the way I was. We traded a look and a smile; it felt as

if we had found a kindred spirit. Westerners were rare here, and that craving for recognition was strong in us both. As dusk set in, we decided to head for the beach to unwind and to see if we could sleep there. By the time we reached the shore, night had already fallen. We burrowed into the warm sand; the sea was quietly lapping at our feet. Off to the right lay the harbour, and across the water the lights of Eilat shimmered in the dark. So close, and yet out of reach.

The enmity in this region kept ordinary human contact from ever truly blooming. Borders were hermetically sealed and guarded day and night. Any misstep - intentional or not - could flare up into a new conflict. As my gaze drifted over the calm sea to the glints on the far shore, I caught myself wondering: 'What, exactly, is going on here?'

We decided to spend the night here. We had barely crawled into our sleeping bags when a sea of light suddenly threw us into full view. Two military jeeps had their headlights trained on us. A group of men piled out and there was a burst of commotion - everyone talking over everyone else in Arabic. We had no idea what was happening. The sergeant signalled that we had to come along: this was military ground.

We'd seen no signs or other indications that this was off-limits. My heart thudded in my throat. What if they took us somewhere remote? We were defenceless before these men with guns. I prayed silently to Our Lord that nothing would happen to us.

They drove us to headquarters about ten kilometres away, searched our belongings and took our passports. The sergeant turned out milder than I'd expected. He saw we meant no harm. After a good hour we were allowed to leave.

'All of Aqaba is military territory,' he said, 'and you're not allowed to sleep outside anywhere.'

Even so, he was kind enough to help.

He drove us to a roadside restaurant a bit farther on: 'With the boss there, you can arrange something for a place to sleep.'

So it proved. The chef led us to the back of the building. There was a patch of ground where travellers stranded here often spent the night. A few crumbling low walls marked the enclosure. We sat with our backs to one of them and made ourselves comfortable.

I told Harold I'd truly been afraid and shared what I'd run into along the road. He'd had similar moments.

'How did you handle it?' I asked.

'Simple - by saying I wasn't interested.'

'That was enough?'

'Yes, except once,' Harold said. 'I was already in the car when, while driving, he lifted his white robe and grabbed my hand to make me touch his genitals. I yanked it back and told him to stop immediately. He refused. I threatened to punch him and actually raised my fist to swing. That scared him; he pulled over. I jumped out and took off.'

I explained to him what the tanker driver had told me beforehand.

Traces of a Lost Civilisation

After all the tension on the road it felt good to travel together for a few days. The next day we headed north - both of us bound for Israel, with only one possible crossing: the King Hussein Bridge near Amman.

We weren't in a hurry, and I enjoyed travelling with someone for a change. Even so, a difference was clear: Harold was stronger, more robust, able to cover longer stretches through the hot, barren country. I didn't want to

fall short and stuck to his heels as long as I could. When I finally had to catch my breath he said, 'Already tired?'

After several days of walking through the dusty interior we reached the Valley of Moses, Wadi Musa, with the ancient trading city of Petra a stone's throw away. It was swarming with tourists, and Harold seemed in another world. I had never heard of Petra. He knew it from books and strode ahead, glowing with enthusiasm. He pointed, explained, named every stone. I mostly took it in silently. This place didn't ask for commentary - it spoke for itself.

While Harold poured out his knowledge of this unique region, we walked through rose-red rock and narrow gorges, past age-old façades, water channels, and ruins. Impressive structures, dozens of metres high, looked down on us with weight. I tried to imagine how people had lived here thousands of years ago - people like us, only in another time. With every step I felt their history - a thread of memory tied to our own hunger for meaning and beauty.

Bedouins

After a day steeped in echoes of the distant past, we pushed on, still hushed by Petra. Toward evening a large black tent appeared on a plateau, a stately silhouette in the last of the light. Harold suggested we ask if we could spend the night there.

A man around sixty welcomed us warmly. He sat cross-legged before the tent and, with a single beckoning motion, invited us closer. We settled onto our backpacks and took in the scene. A small fire crackled; on its bed of coals a teapot was drawing. The man spoke only Arabic. With a few plain gestures he signalled that we were welcome to eat - an offer we accepted with gratitude - and he indicated a spot where

we could lay out our sleeping bags. That would be our place for the night.

We tried to make conversation anyway, piecing it together with gestures and expressions.

He told us he had four wives. The youngest - barely sixteen - waited on us. Her movements were measured, almost ceremonial. A frayed wool dress to just below the knee cloaked her slight figure; the thick mass of hair on her narrow head was stiff with dust. In silence she poured syrupy-sweet tea into small glasses - with that bitter edge of leaves steeped too long - and each time made a slight bow as a sign of respect. The other wives stayed inside.

The man made it plain that they wandered freely across borders that to others felt fixed. For millennia they had ranged through this country: Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Iraq, Syria. Their way of life laid bare that borders are only bargains - shifting, temporary.

'Strange,' I thought. 'They owned no land, yet everything here was theirs. Those tightly guarded frontiers, so contested and so often paid for in blood, are, in the end, nothing more than an idea.'

The girl arrived with a low metal tray and set it before us: flatbread, a mound of rice, spiced bits of meat, a small bowl of yoghurt, a few olives. We ate with the right hand - tearing bread, dipping, sharing. Our host joined us.

Somewhere out of sight goats bleated; a dog barked once and gave up. The air cooled, the sun was gone, the sky struck its first stars.

After we ate, the fire was put out and we crawled into our sleeping bags.

The King's Bridge

Slowly we felt it was time to cross the border into Israel - the Promised Land. At the same time our cooperation began to chafe. At a certain point I had the impression that Harold would rather be rid of me; in his view I walked too slowly.

The walk to the King Hussein Bridge - the only official crossing between Jordan and Israel - was long. The tempo didn't sit well with Harold, and however hard I tried to keep step with him, I couldn't. We didn't see each other again after that.

The checkpoint bristled with soldiers. You couldn't cross on foot; you had to buy a shuttle-bus ticket. A run of only a few hundred metres - that was all. In a tiny office we bought the tickets, and there they checked the passports as well.

In front of the little building a long queue had formed. I was the last. The problem: only a few buses ran each day. If you were late, you were out of luck - sometimes until the next morning. When at last it was my turn, it went wrong. The official claimed the bus was full. I didn't believe it. To my eye there was still room enough, but he refused to sell me a ticket. The next bus? Not until tomorrow morning.

I made a scene - loud enough that even the commander outside the building heard it.

I longed to be back in a Western country. A place with a culture I understood. Where boys and girls mingled openly, and I could make myself understood without effort. I wanted to feel again what it is to be free as an individual. Here I had little connection. I'd had enough. Not one day longer did I want to stay.

So I forced the issue. He had to give me that ticket. I wasn't leaving otherwise. The commander assessed the situation. He stayed calm. That worked. A little later I had my

ticket. I said nothing more. I thanked him, shook both their hands, and walked to the waiting bus.

For a royal river crossing you might have expected grandeur; instead, it was a narrow metal bridge with a single lane - just wide enough for the bus. On the far side, high on a hill, soldiers kept the passage under sharp watch. They stood ready in a sandbagged post, machine guns at the ready.

Jerusalem

I didn't need a visa and could stay as long as I wished, the woman at passport control told me. Good to know. Outside, a row of Palestinian taxis waited - this was the West Bank; Palestinian territory. I got on a bus to Jerusalem.

What I found there was not what I had imagined. The Holy City, which ought to have been a warm welcome to all followers of the God of Abraham, was permeated by fear.

Everywhere walked groups of armed soldiers - young boys and girls - some not even twenty. It had something of an occupied city.

I walked through the centre, past age-old stone buildings, temples, and markets. Palestinians, Jews, tourists - everyone moved through one another. I saw no differences. Only people. Each unique, yet all human.

In a square I spoke to a girl in uniform. She was young, perhaps nineteen. Beautiful, and armed. 'Why are you patrolling here?' I asked.

'We're protecting people from attacks,' she answered in fluent English.

'If we see anything suspicious, we're allowed to check bags. That's how we keep it safe here.'

'Do you check Jewish people as well? Or only Palestinians?'

She looked at me as if I'd missed something.

'They're the ones who carry out the attacks.'

She gave a brief smile and walked on, the rifle slung loosely over her shoulder.

I watched her go and wondered: *they're protecting something - but what, exactly?* Not only themselves, but an idea as well. A claim. Perhaps a fear.

Where did the problem lie? Was it pride? Did one people truly believe it stood above another and thus had a right to more? In the holy city, the holy land. But what is holy about a place where hatred rules and neighbours distrust each other?

Ruth and Hospitality

At a café terrace I struck up a conversation with a somewhat older woman. Her name was Ruth, and she told me her family had originally come from the Netherlands. I tried a little Dutch with her, but apart from a few stray words the language meant little to her.

It clicked immediately. We laughed a lot, and after a while she said that if I wanted, I could come and stay with her. She had two young children; her husband, a scientist, was temporarily in the US for research. She came across as sincere and warm. I gladly accepted her offer.

After the intimidation at the border and the tensions in the city, I was struck by how quickly Ruth took me into her home. It felt like a rare moment of trust in a region where distrust seemed the norm.

They lived in a luxury flat just outside the centre. I was

given my own room and could come and go as I pleased. The next day she even gave me a key to the house.

In the evening I asked why she had taken me in without knowing who I was.

'During the Second World War, Jews were taken in by people who didn't know them,' she said. 'And that was life-threatening. Why shouldn't I do the same? We owe our freedom in part to such people.'

Perhaps hospitality is exactly that: letting someone in without a guarantee, because you know that you too were once received.

I asked what it is like to live in a country where you still live in fear.

'Terrible,' she said. 'It feels as if it will never end.'

'What do you think the solution is?'

'Only when we see people in need as ourselves - as we once were - can anything change here. Otherwise it remains war.'

During the day I explored the city; in the evenings I ate with Ruth and the children. They found it rather exciting, having a strange man in the house. The children spoke good English, and the boy challenged me to a game of draughts. As a child I'd been quite skilled at it, but I hadn't played in years.

I enjoyed his fanaticism - he wanted to beat me at all costs. And he managed it once. Triumphantly he ran to his mother and told her in Hebrew how he had wiped the floor with me. 'A real grandmaster, hè,' Ruth laughed.

Two Voices at the Western Wall

Curious about the city's spiritual heart, I made my way to the Western Wall one afternoon. There I overheard two

men speaking English. I stood close enough to catch every word. One of them - roughly my age - clearly held the floor. The other, older by a good margin, kept to the background and let the talk wash over him. Both wore a kippah.

The younger man argued that Jews had the stronger claim to the land than Palestinians.

'At least we do something with it,' he said. 'We make it fertile, grow crops, feed the population.' The older man listened, but his gaze wandered. The younger one asked for confirmation after every point.

'Yes, yes,' the older murmured, the way you do when you'd rather let a topic drop.

Unfazed, the younger pushed on about how Jews worked the soil and brought the land to life. The older held his tongue - until the younger invoked historical rights.

'The scriptures say this has always been our land,' the younger said. 'The Palestinians need to accept that.'

Silence for a moment. Then the older turned to him, voice low and precise.

'And what about other peoples?' he asked. 'Do they also have rights to their 'original' lands, even when the population has completely changed? Should Germans claim parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia, or France simply because Germans once lived there - and because some text records it? And Native Americans - do they get to reclaim the United States because they were there first?'

The younger man stalled; for a moment nothing came.

'But don't you think this land is ours?' he managed at last.

'So long as there is no peace,' the older replied, 'this land belongs to no one. We are still fighting for it.'

He turned on his heel and walked away.

That single line stayed with me. Through the rest of my

time in Israel it kept echoing - through the landscape itself, in the conversations I fell into, and in the general condition of the country.

Through the Holy Land

After about a week I told Ruth I wanted to see more of the country. She understood without fuss.

The night before I left, the three of us ate together. Her daughter was sleeping over at a friend's. Ruth had cooked - something simple, made with care. Her little boy chattered away cheerfully, cracked jokes, and tried to persuade me to stay a little longer.

After dinner we played cards. Ruth won by a mile.

'Will I miss you?' she said with a smile. 'Maybe a little.'

We laughed. There was an easy lightness in the air, as if we all knew this didn't have to be a forever goodbye.

In the morning, when it was time, we walked outside together. Her son hugged me and whispered, 'Will you ever come back?'

'Maybe,' I said.

Not long after, I hitch-hiked my way across the country. It went surprisingly smoothly - drivers stopped readily and made room.

Checkpoints cropped up everywhere, each one preceded by heavy concrete blocks planted on both sides of the road. There we drove slowly, zigzagging through, and then soldiers were waiting for us with automatic weapons. Most of the time we were waved on; now and then we had to show papers and answer a question or two.

There were also guys who picked up hitch-hikers purely for the company - to talk, to pass the day. I met one like that.

'Nothing better to do,' he said, and while I rode with him

he collected two more along the way, all of us packed into the same car like a rolling conversation.

Wherever I went, people had opinions about the country's troubles. Some blamed the Jews, others the Palestinians, still others religion itself. The diagnoses contradicted each other, but the certainty with which they were offered felt the same.

The Promised Land, Misread

Later, in Hebron, I heard a different note. Not pious, but human - as if someone finally said plainly what was actually wrong.

I was sitting under a parasol at a tiny tea stand when a middle-aged man took the stool beside mine. He had a kind face and spoke fluent English. We started with the weather, tourism, tea - those small topics that make room for larger ones. Soon enough the conversation turned to religion, and it was clear the subject gripped him.

'Tell me,' he said, 'why is everyone obsessed with this one patch of land? Since the Crusades - and probably long before - it's been on edge here. Everyone treats holy Jerusalem as the centre of the universe. Why? Because old texts say so?'

He sipped his tea and fixed me with a sustained look.

'All that talk of a Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey... Who can seriously believe it refers to this scorched, battered strip of earth?'

'Isn't it far more likely those words point to something spiritual? Not a country, not real estate - but a place in our heart. An inner state of being. Not possession, but consciousness. That's what religion is about, isn't it? Spirit - not stones and soil.'

'But as long as people refuse to see that - as long as they cling to the deceptive outer layer and miss the core - the quarrels will never end.'

He fell silent, then added: 'Sometimes I think we should shut every religious building here. A thousand years of silence. No sermons, no claims, no crosses, no Stars of David, no crescents. Only then might we learn what it means to be human - without anyone feeling superior to anyone else, supposedly in God's name.'

He leaned back and let out a long breath. 'Be honest,' he said at last. 'What have the three religions brought us here, in the end, except endless quarrels, wreckage, and death?'

Over us the parasol flapped in the wind; a sudden gust sent dust skittering across the terrace.

'What does it come down to in the end? Living in harmony - isn't that what every religion, at bottom, aims for? If you don't grasp that, you might as well leave it alone. Then it's no use invoking it.'

I looked at him, moved by his openness. He was Jewish, but beneath that lay something more fundamental: humanity. What purpose did faith serve if it kept leading to bloodshed?

The Burning Sea

After that bracing conversation I longed for something physical - simple, tangible, undeniable.

I headed for the Dead Sea, a place I'd always wondered about. Four hundred metres below sea level, water so salty you float without trying - I wanted to feel that for myself.

Near Masada a young driver on his way to Eilat dropped me at the roadside. Across the water steep rock faces rose, and behind them lay Jordan. I stripped to my trunks and

walked in. I'd hoped for coolness; the water was warmer than the air, and I kept sweating. But the legend was true: you could not sink. No matter what I tried, I bobbed on the surface like a cork on a still pond.

All that walking had left its marks - raw thighs, a tender face. The instant the brine touched me it felt as if my skin were on fire. I couldn't stand it; I scrambled back out.

On shore it wasn't much better. Salt clung to every inch of me, and I didn't have enough fresh water to rinse it away. I tried rubbing off the crust with a towel; it barely helped. Everything stung and stuck; even the breeze felt abrasive.

A little later I thought: maybe the salt heals. The minerals might cleanse the raw spots - maybe you have to go through the sting to get to the cure.

I went back into the mucky water, this time on a mission. I clenched my teeth and stayed as long as I could. I did that a few times, letting the burn crest and ebb. Then I called it; enough was enough.

The Night on Masada

Toward evening I fell in with a small group planning to climb the hill to Masada - a place long taken as a symbol of defiance. They wanted to sleep on the summit and watch the famous sunrise. I asked if I could join; they waved me in without a second thought.

There were seven of us, a lively mix of nationalities. Among them a Jewish guy, Sem, and his Palestinian girl-friend, Muna. The ascent was long and steep; by the time we reached the top it was fully dark. Up there, the air moved more and felt cooler, although it was still pleasant enough to sit outside among the ruins of this ancient citadel.

After some time we slipped into our sleeping bags and waited for dawn.

Sem and Muna were the first to rise. It was still dark. Half dreaming, I turned over again, then heard their whisper as they moved among us.

'It's starting,' they said.

From inside my bag I watched the light come slowly. We arranged ourselves in a half-circle, faces turned to the east, and waited in silence for the first rays to break.

What began as a spontaneous overnight stay turned out to hold something much greater.

The Creation Story*

Sem said, 'Before the sun rises, Muna and I would like to share something with you: the *creation story*, as we have come to understand it. For us, it is not an account of the origin of the universe, but a portrayal of the spiritual growth of humankind.'

The Bible is a spiritual book and calls for more than a literal reading. For us, this story is a key: it helps us better understand the world and ourselves.

We want to share it with you because the rising sun-like this story-is a symbol of inner awakening.'

Someone sighed, someone else nodded. No one spoke, and yet the silence felt full of meaning. Then Sem began.

The first day of creation.

'In the beginning God created heaven and earth, and the earth was formless and void, and darkness lay over the deep; but the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. God said: Let there be light - and there was light. God saw that

the light was good; then He separated the light from the darkness. He called the light day and the darkness night. Evening came and morning followed; that was the first day.

'What did Moses mean by "heaven" and "earth"? "Heaven" is what is spiritual within the human being, and "earth" is what is natural. At this point both are still barren and empty. The "waters" are our narrow, limited grasp of things. The Spirit of God hovers above them, but is not yet within them. Hence the word: let there be light.'

The first natural state of the human being corresponds to night - like a child in the mother's womb. The soul is not yet developed; darkness reigns. Once born, the child is taught skills and insights. With these it can hold its own in the world. That earthly condition corresponds to evening - just as the light of the natural day wanes into dusk.

'If we lock onto intellect alone, the divine light in the heart goes dim. Only when God's love begins to kindle in us does cold rationality recede. God's true light in the human heart is morning. That is why evening comes first and then morning. This is the path the spiritual process necessarily takes: the merely intellectual loses its claim in the oncoming night, and in the morning spiritual understanding takes its place. That was the first day.'

By now the light was growing, though the sun itself had not yet shown. Muna took over from Sem and continued.

The second day of creation.

'God said: "There must be a rock within the waters to divide the masses of water." And so it was.

'That rock is the true heaven in a person's heart: a living faith by which one can tell natural from spiritual. The waters withdraw. As this faith increases, the human being

sees more and more how small the merely intellectual is. In this way the intellect lets itself be governed by faith, and out of evening a brighter morning arises. The morning of the second day is already lighter than that of the first.

'On the second day one sees what is true - and what will prove true for ever. But the right ordering is missing. The natural is still mixed with the spiritual, and so one cannot always act rightly. For instance, one does not yet know whether faith comes from knowledge or knowledge from faith, nor what the difference between the two actually is. But God comes to help. He strengthens the light in the human being, and like a spring sun He brings warmth - so that the seeds planted in our hearts begin to germinate. That warmth is love, and is, spiritually speaking, the soil in which the seeds take root. Therefore the waters had to be parted, so that dry ground would appear - places where seeds could grow into fruits that give life.'

Muna paused, and above the mountains an orange glow slowly appeared.

'Would you like to hear the third day? Or is this becoming tedious?' We all shook our heads. 'No - please go on,' we said with real eagerness.

The third day of creation.

'And God said: Let the land be covered with green - plants bearing seed, and trees that carry fruit.' And so it happened.

'Now the human being can set to work. His insights are like rain-laden clouds rising from the sea to water the dry land and make it fruitful. The earth turns green and brings forth plants, grasses, and trees that seed themselves again. This means: love in the human heart immediately desires

what heavenly wisdom suggests. As a seed in good soil bears much fruit, so the right knowledge, planted in the heart's living soil, bears fruit as deed. Heaven's light becomes action. This is the third day in the development of the human heart - the day of the spiritual human being. In the end, that is whom this story is about.'

Muna paused again, and by now we felt the first rays of sun on our faces. Sem took it back.

The fourth day of creation.

'And God said: Let there be lights in the firmament to separate day from night, to mark the seasons, days, and years; and let there, besides all the stars, be two great lights in the firmament to shine upon the earth - a greater light for the day and a lesser for the night.' And so it came to be.

'When a person reaches a certain spiritual maturity, God awakens His uncreated, eternal Spirit in that person's heart. These are the two great lights set in the expanse. Every human being has a soul - which is spirit as well - and with it the capacity to discern good from evil and to make the good one's own. When a soul, in full freedom, has embraced the good, it is ready to receive the uncreated Divine within. The pure Divine is the greater light; the human soul, formed and illumined by it, is the lesser.'

'Through the union of the soul with the Divine, a person can see God in His purest essence. That is what Moses means when he says the greater light "rules" the day and the lesser the night: it means we can, in wisdom, trace the spiritual origin of created things. And with that also what Moses calls "times, days, and years" - that is, recognising divine wisdom, love, and grace within all phenomena. The stars, then, are the many useful insights we gain into particulars -

naturally flowing from the one great insight symbolised by the two great lights.'

'I'll keep the rest brief,' Sem said.

The fifth and the sixth days of creation.

'These days describe the creation of animals and of the human being. By this Moses means: the full coming-to-life of what the human being carries by nature. In the pure, uncreated divine light, the human being perceives the limitless and endlessly varied abundance of creative ideas and forms - and begins, in this way, to realise his pure divine origin. The story of the creation of the first human is the image of humanity as a whole becoming fully human; that is, the attainment of perfect divine sonship.'

He looked at us and said:

'Perhaps you now understand that Adam and Eve were not the first physical humans, but the first spiritual ones - humans as God intended them to be, and we their descendants.'

He closed with one last message. 'Seek first, in your heart, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then worry little about the rest; it can fall to you suddenly and unannounced. But for now let's enjoy the sunrise - and especially the one in our hearts.'

By then the sky was flushing yellow and orange. A mighty fireball edged over the horizon and warmed our faces. Bare mountains and valleys lost their sharp edges and soon bathed in a sea of light. The creation story - not as the origin of earth and stars, but as the inner road of the human being. Who would have thought to see it that way?

The sun broke through as if light were being separated from darkness once again. But now as a symbol of an inner

awakening. Below, the Dead Sea rippled back and forth like a breath: waters that recede, dry ground appearing - outside us, within us. What had been murky settled. Thoughts cleared like silt that finally finds the bottom. Somewhere between chest and throat a hatch swung open.

And we, our faces turned to the east, suddenly knew how it worked: first evening, then morning; first the mind that dims, then the love that burns. Outside it became day. Within, creation began.

Jakob Lorber

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, I asked Sem where he had learnt this.

'From *Jakob Lorber*. In his multi-volume Great Gospel of John he gives this reading of the creation story.'

'But isn't that a Christian book? Aren't you Jewish?'

'Yes. The books are Muna's - she's Christian. I read them too. Religion as such doesn't matter much to me. I want what is true. This reading of creation feels truer to me than what I got from my parents or in the synagogue. They took the imagery literally. I think that happens in many religions. That's why Muna and I, on certain occasions, offer another voice. We've presented this story dozens of times. It moves us every time when people fall quiet before an old story that, in a different light, suddenly carries a wholly different meaning.'

Jakob Lorber. I told myself to remember the name.

When we descended the mountain, raw reality came to meet us again. It was as if the summit's magic refused to come along. Up there there had been only space and light; down here waited oppositions, opinions, borders. And yet

we carried something with us - a glimpse of something larger, something gentle.

But here, among concrete blocks and checkpoints, between machine guns and barbed wire, that gentleness felt vulnerable. And at the same time: indestructible.

No People More Worthy Than Another

After two weeks I felt as if my journey here had reached its end. For all the striking conversations and spiritual insights, the political reality kept grinding. One side held the reins tight; the other refused to yield. It was painful to experience this land - so heavy with sacred meaning - as a place of distrust and division.

We were raised on the idea that, after the horrors of the Second World War, the Jewish people deserved a safe refuge. But here and now, others who have lived on this land for generations turned out not to be safe themselves.

Is one people worth more than another? Does anyone hold a patent on suffering? What is wrong with living together?

'Everyone has the right to be here - otherwise they wouldn't be,' my father used to say.

I wished I could believe the way Kostas did: that behind this bitter conflict a gentle force is at work that ultimately binds us - our own creative power. To believe, unshakeably, that we are one. Whatever happens.

I decided to leave. I hitch-hiked to the Egyptian border, bought a visa for three days, flew from Cairo to Athens, and four days later I was home.

. . .

* From the works of Jakob Lorber: *The Great Gospel of John*, vol. I.

PART II

GUITAR ON MY BACK

SOUNDS OF THE STREET

Music

From the age of six I took lessons. First recorder, then trumpet, and as a teenager guitar. After returning from Israel, I devoted myself entirely to the guitar. I practiced for hours every day and gradually improved. Jazz had taken hold of me; it challenged me to capture my soul in sound. I played in bands and with the Big Band Emmen. Continuing along that path seemed obvious - I seriously considered the conservatory.

But the pull of freedom was stronger. Not study, but travel and adventure would shape the years that followed. This time with a guitar on my back.

With money that had been saved, I bought a second-hand motorcycle at the age of twenty-five: a BMW R 80 G/S, suitable for both road and off-road. I wanted to travel through Europe on it. First heading north: Scandinavia.

Copenhagen

My first destination was Copenhagen, a city I only knew by name. Guitar in its bag on my back, tent and sleeping bag strapped to the bike, together with the rest of my gear. My mother had sewn a pair of leather gaiters I could wear over my pants against the cold. From Hamburg I rode up the autobahn to Puttgarden and took the ferry across to Denmark.

Near Copenhagen I found a campsite. During the day I rode into the city. It was there I first tried playing on the street. I still had some savings - enough to last a while - but the idea was of course to earn my way. That turned out to be harder than expected. It was summer, and the shopping streets were packed with musicians. By the end of the day I often had only a few kroner to show for it. Still, we musicians got along well. We might have been each other's competitors, but the atmosphere was friendly. In the evenings, when the shops closed, we got together to jam. Those were the best moments.

There was a Swedish guy, Gustaf, who always played in the same spot. He was the linchpin of the scene. What struck me was that he played the same song all day long - *Room to Move* by John Mayall. On his harmonica he stretched it out endlessly with long, dragging blues solos. When he finished, he'd simply start again. On the street it worked fine - the constant stream of passersby hardly noticed. For me it would have been soul-deadening, but for him it worked. And when we jammed and he joined in, it didn't matter what song we started with - somehow we always ended up back at *Room to Move*. But since it was such a killer song, nobody minded. We went wild every time.

I also met Nils, another Swede. He had a beautiful voice

and played both on the street and in cafés. There he sang, for example, Elton John's *Daniel* - one of his favorites - and passed the hat. In no time, he earned more than I did after hours outside.

For me that was still a bridge too far. walking into a café and playing - I didn't have the nerve.

We got along well though. Nils said I was always welcome at his place in Stockholm and gave me his address. He'd be heading back soon. I stayed in Copenhagen. What came next, I'd see when the time came.

Christiania

Besides playing, I also wanted to see something of the alternative culture the city was famous for. There were several hubs of creativity and nonconformity, but one fascinated me most: Christiania - the free town in the middle of Copenhagen. Originally an old dockworkers' quarter, the entire neighborhood had been squatted in the sixties.

A colourful, anarchist enclave, with painted walls, houses built from scrap wood, tyres, and salvaged material. The residents - a mix of hippies, artists, activists, ex-junkies, and idealists - were searching for another way of life. Free from authority, bureaucracy, and commercial pressure.

But when I went there, the hippies and artists were long gone. What I saw instead were biker gangs in leather jackets with their insignias. They seemed to run the place. Where I had expected creativity and communal harmony, there was a grim mood. Drug dealers, addicts, kids hanging around aimlessly - It was bleak. I wandered through, hoping to catch a glimpse of what I had imagined beforehand. In vain. Disappointed, I left.

So this was what had become of the free town.

Were the dark forces always stronger than the good?
Was humanity incapable of living together without
leaders or authority?
With those questions, I walked back into the city.

Motorcycle wrecked

Playing on the street was growing on me. I didn't earn much, but the freedom, the encounters, the chance to express myself - it gave me a deep sense of fulfillment. The street became my stage; the audience appeared on its own. It was a way of life that suited me. But there were rougher moments too.

One evening, returning to the campsite, I found my motorcycle had been vandalized. Someone had tried to steal it, but mostly wrecked it. The ignition was broken - starting was impossible. The only thing I could do was unlock the steering so I could push it. Luckily there was a motorcycle garage nearby. It was late, already closed, but inside a young mechanic was tidying up. I told him what had happened, and he decided to help me right away. In no time, he fitted a new dashboard.

While he was working, the boss walked in. He immediately started laying into the boy. I didn't understand Danish, but the tone was unmistakable: he was furious. I didn't know what it was about, but I felt my presence was unwelcome. I stood there awkwardly, not knowing how to respond. Should I speak up? Explain my side? But I stayed quiet. It seemed wiser not to interfere.

In the end the boy was allowed to finish. He gave me a quick, knowing smile and silently carried on. When he was done, he called his boss over. I paid, got my new keys, and thanked them both.

Only then did it hit me how vulnerable I was on a motorcycle - especially since I knew so little about mechanics myself. Repairs on a BMW were expensive, and this wouldn't be the last time.

A Leap Forward

The money I had to spend took a deep cut out of my budget - something I hadn't reckoned with. From now on, I'd be leaning more heavily on what I earned on the street. I decided to take a leap forward. By now I knew for certain: this was the life I wanted.

But in Copenhagen I saw little future. Too many musicians, too little income. If I stayed, I might as well give up and go home. So I set my course for Stockholm, to Nils. I hadn't seen him in a while and figured he'd be back there by now.

From Helsingør I took the ferry across to Helsingborg. Instead of heading straight to Stockholm, I chose the long road along Sweden's western side, toward Karlstad.

It was a joy to ride the motorcycle. The road curled through a landscape of soft hills, forests and lakes, with red-painted wooden houses scattered along the way. The sky was bright, with the occasional puff of cloud drifting like a woolen ship across the blue. The asphalt lay silent, almost deserted; once in a while an oncoming driver raised a hand in greeting.

Like a dancer with no audience I leaned into the bends. I felt free. My gut decided the speed. No rush, no noise - only the steady growl of the engine and a backdrop repeating itself into infinity.

Toward evening I'd find a spot in the forest or by a lake, pitch my tent, and let the day fade away.

Sonja

Somewhere near Säffle I met a young woman. She lived in a storybook house, hidden among the trees outside a small village. I rode past, slowed, and stopped - curiosity pulling me in. At first glance the place looked abandoned. But soon a woman appeared in a long lilac dress. She asked what I was doing there. I was surprised and felt a little embarrassed to be standing there so openly in front of her home. I stammered an explanation. She immediately put me at ease; she didn't mind at all and even seemed to appreciate my interest. With a faint smile she said that, if I wanted, I was welcome to come in for a moment.

The moment I crossed the threshold, a heaviness came over me. Happiness had long since departed. In the living room stood a sofa and a low table cluttered with half-burnt candles, empty cups, a scatter of stones, old lighters and yellowed scraps of paper. Clumps of wax stuck to the tabletop.

A wardrobe leaned against the wall, with a few clothes hanging inside. A faded purple rug stained brown lay across the floor. In one corner an old TV with a spindly antenna. On the windowsill, the plants drooped - thirsty, dull, forgotten.

In the kitchen the sink overflowed with dishes and pans. The double doors to the back garden stood open, but there was little of a garden to be seen. The grass reached knee height - just like in the front garden. It felt like the place was waiting for a storm of energy to sweep through and clear away the gloom.

It surprised me she had invited me in at all - a stranger, stepping into a house where sorrow clung to the walls.

'Sonja,' she said casually, nodding toward the couch

where I could sit. She rinsed two cups, made tea, and sat beside me.

Her face carried the traces of neglect. Fine flakes on her cheeks, dark circles beneath her eyes, her skin pale and tired. Her blonde hair hung limp around her shoulders until she pulled it back in a loose tie. Mid-thirties, I guessed. Her English was good enough, and when I told her why I'd stopped, her eyes lit for a moment, a smile breaking through.

She told me that, as an only child, she had inherited her parents' house. They had passed away some time earlier - first her father, shortly afterward her mother. It was clear how much she missed them, especially her father, with whom she had often walked through the forests. From him she had learned to observe nature: she knew everything about mushrooms, plants, and shrubs - which ones were edible and which had medicinal properties. Her mother would then turn these into remedies, or prepare meals using what they brought home from the woods.

I couldn't place what weighed her down - and strictly speaking it wasn't my business. Still, I wondered. So I asked how they had died.

'A car accident,' she said.

Her father gone instantly, her mother days later. She paused, weighing whether to go on. Was there more than the accident?

She rose, stepped out through the open doors.

That's all I'll hear, I thought.

But then she came back, sat down again, cleared her throat. A story was waiting on her lips.

'My father was a psychiatrist,' she began. 'He specialized in hallucinogenic plants - especially mushrooms. He believed they could aid in treating psychiatric patients. He

experimented, always voluntary, always by the book. *Micro-dosing* - the smallest amounts.

But one day it went wrong. A patient lost grip on reality after a session and later took his own life. The family - wealthy, well connected - blamed my father. They sued for negligence causing death. He was acquitted; they had signed consent, the dose had been safe. But they wouldn't let it go. From then on they set out to destroy him. Even death threats.

He quit the therapies, eventually closed his practice altogether. He was emotionally broken. Publicly shamed, stripped of credibility - at least in his own eyes, forever.'

She sipped her tea before going on.

'That wasn't all,' she went on. 'The people in the village began to avoid us. A man who had once been respected was suddenly seen as some kind of sorcerer from Norse folklore - someone who spoke with spirits and performed dark rituals. We became pariahs in our own community.'

The stories that circulated grew ever more grotesque. Our family was ostracized. When we needed groceries, we would drive all the way to Karlstad and stock up for a month. In the village it was too confronting.'

She shook her head. Even now, she couldn't believe it.

'My father never recovered. He drank more and more. One afternoon, driving back with my mother, he lost control and crashed head-on into a tree.'

She looked at me briefly, her gaze fragile, then lowered her head. I wanted to put an arm around her - but held back.

'And you?' I asked softly.

'At first we held each other up,' she said. 'Now I'm alone. To the village I'm a recluse. A witch. I can't handle it. We

were wronged for something we never did. I ask myself every day: why?

I hesitated, then said: 'It is said that the one whom God loves most must suffer the most.'

'Why would that be?'

'Because those who suffer deeply often seek their comfort in God. And in doing so, they draw close to Him. That is His intention. Those who live in comfort feel no longing for God and therefore remain more distant from Him.'

Her eyes stayed fixed on the cup.

'I don't feel Him,' she whispered. 'Not close. More like He's abandoned us.'

'I understand.'

Her melancholy hung over us like a heavy blanket. I wanted to escape that feeling. My hands itched to do something in the house, so I suggested doing the dishes. She declined, but I insisted. At last she relented. Soon we stood side by side - me washing, her drying. When we finished, she told me I could pitch my tent in the front yard. I went ahead with it. I didn't see Sonja again that evening.

The next morning I packed my things. I knocked on the door to thank her. It was still early, and it took a moment before she opened. With a vague smile, her hair tied back in a ponytail and wearing yesterday's lilac dress, she offered me an uncertain handshake. She said there was probably gossip again. A strange man in her house all night, with whom she had undoubtedly shared her bed. She claimed it didn't bother her, but her eyes suggested otherwise.

I rode away carrying a weight I couldn't shake. Her house, her grief, her loneliness - it had touched me. She was caught in a story that had gone on too long, in a world deaf

to her voice. I was only a passerby, a chance witness to her tragedy.

While riding, I found my calm again. The familiar cadence, a nod from another motorcyclist, the scent of pine and petrol. Slowly the thoughts slipped away and the road lay open again.

An Unexpected Fan

Even among motorcyclists I sensed a brotherhood, not unlike the kinship of street musicians. Groups would gather in certain places, and whenever I joined them, I was immediately welcomed. On the road we acknowledged each other with a subtle hand gesture - except the Harley riders, who reserved their greetings exclusively for fellow Harley riders.

Beyond Karlstad I chose a campsite for the night, mainly to make use of the facilities. My pitch was beside a Swedish couple and their young son. She, a sun-brown woman in her forties, lay topless in a deckchair; he, a burly two-metre hulk with a forest of hair, sat in the awning of their trailer drinking his way through a mountain of beer cans.

They struck up contact right away - especially the boy, who was completely fascinated by the motorbike. He longed to touch it, and I nodded my consent. After inspecting every detail, I lifted him onto the saddle. Stretched out across the tank, his little hands managed to reach the handlebars. He twisted the throttle and, with shining eyes, cried: 'brrroem, brrroem.'

His parents laughed and murmured something in Swedish. That evening they invited me to share their meal. The father handed me a beer, and I discovered why he could drink so many - it held only 2% alcohol. In Sweden you could buy that in any supermarket; for stronger stuff

you had to visit the *Systembolaget*, the state-run liquor store, but the nearest one was far away.

He also gave me a piece of advice: summer in Sweden is brief, and winter can descend without warning. It was only late July, so I was still safe, but I stored away his warning.

After dinner I played frisbee with their son, then pulled out my guitar for a few songs. before bed he asked me for an autograph - convinced I was destined to be famous. Amused, I signed his scrap of paper. My first autograph for a fan, and as it turned out, my last.

The following day I reached Stockholm and set out to find Nils.

Stockholm

I located his address quickly, but when I rang the bell, silence. Around the corner a gate led into a narrow courtyard with a back door. I parked the bike there. That day, and the days after, Nils never appeared. At night I unrolled my sleeping bag under the gate, leaning against the motorbike, hidden yet close to my belongings.

One morning an old woman stepped out of the back door and launched into a stream of Swedish invective. I understood not a word, but her voice and her stance were enough: a stranger at the door was a threat. Fair enough. I tried to soothe her, mentioned Nils's name, explained with gestures that I was waiting for him. She knew him - but still she looked at me with unease.

The next day Nils finally turned up. The woman had spoken to him already; she had been frightened to find me sleeping there. He sympathized with her - and told me it hadn't been the wisest move. I agreed, ashamed, and apologized. I had no wish to get him into trouble. He waved it off,

assured me the bike could stay, and helped me carry my gear upstairs. From then on I lived with him.

I was given the entry code and a key to the flat, free to come and go. At first I spent most of my time inside. There was little reason to wander. Nils had a wide circle of friends, many from Southern Europe and the Middle East. They dropped by often, filling the rooms with conversation and laughter. He wasn't, they said, a typical Swede - too open, too generous. I hadn't noticed the famous Swedish reserve myself, but that was the reputation.

Nils and I planned to make music together. He had a gig lined up, and I would join him. Meanwhile I tried my luck busking, but as in Copenhagen, there was little to be made.

Still, Stockholm charmed me. Winding alleys led past the quays of the islands, through neighborhoods with a village air. From time to time the streets opened onto sweeping views of water and spires. The city breathed light and space, its grand coloured facades reflected in the waves. Everything was spotless, ordered - more so than in Copenhagen.

Stockholm possessed a solemn grandeur, a quiet dignity I had never felt in another city.

Concert in the Park

One afternoon, wandering through the centre, I came upon Finn - a young Irishman tuning his guitar in a small park. He sat on a bench at the heart of a round square bordered by a low wall of black stone. Already a circle of listeners was waiting for him to begin.

He spotted my guitar and called out if I wanted to join. I hesitated. The thought of playing before a real audience made me nervous. Yet I felt the challenge.

'Sure, why not,' I said, trying to sound braver than I felt.

'Warm them up for me,' he grinned. 'I'll be ready in a minute.'

I hadn't seen that coming - suddenly thrown before the crowd. I had never played alone in public. But there was no escape now.

I drew a deep breath, took out my guitar, and glanced about, uneasy. While checking the tuning, I racked my brain for what to play. Dozens of songs came to mind, none seemed right. At last I chose an old standby: an instrumental, a swinging blues progression with walking bass lines and a few improvised flights. I had played it a thousand times before. At least it spared me the ordeal of singing. But would this crowd care for it? It was surely unlike Finn's usual fare.

To my astonishment, the little square erupted in applause when I finished. Finn beamed and announced me as a brilliant guitarist - which I was not - whom he had invited especially for the occasion. We played together the whole afternoon. I followed his chords, weaving rhythm and melody around them.

Finn owned the stage. He drew the people in, held them in his palm. It was entirely his show. At the end we split the takings - more money than I had ever earned in so short a time. For him it was routine; for me it felt unreal. I wondered what his secret was. His guitar playing was ordinary, his voice unremarkable. Yet wherever he sat down, a crowd gathered.

'He must have had some gift,' I thought.

That was something I lacked. I was shy, uneasy in front of a crowd. A song or two perhaps - but never an entire afternoon.

On the Front Page

The next day something unexpected happened. To our amazement, Finn and I were on the front page of the newspaper.

Apparently, exactly one year earlier, on the same date and in the same park, riots had broken out between two rival youth groups. They had agreed to meet there again for another confrontation. We had no idea.

But when the two groups arrived at the park, Finn and I were in the middle of our performance, and the atmosphere was relaxed. Instead of fighting, they joined the audience and listened. The clash never took place.

A journalist who was aware of the plans had come to the park to report on any potential disturbances. She ended up writing about it for the paper.

Music unites, read the headline.

No riots like last year. A concert by two great musicians created such a good atmosphere that the youngsters forgot what they had come for.

Music seemed to have the power to move things - even to prevent conflict. In that moment, it struck me: what I did had meaning, I had meaning.

Playing in the Metro

But after our brief moment of fame, the next day I was back on the street as usual. I hadn't played with Nils yet, but he badly needed money and suggested we make music in the metro. He already had some experience with it. The plan was simple: we would ride the entire metro line and play one song between each stop. After that we would pass the hat - me on one side of the carriage, him on the other.

It sounded like a good idea. Exciting, too. Something different for a change. We chose a few songs that would work well and set out.

We bought a ticket at the counter and boarded the next train. Standing opposite each other in the aisle, about five metres apart, we began as soon as the train pulled out and the passengers settled into their seats.

It worked perfectly. One song was enough - the ride between stops was short, and people still needed time to dig out their wallets. If someone wanted to give but couldn't manage quickly enough, we'd move on and circle back later.

Sometimes there wasn't even time to ask everyone before the doors opened and people got off. But soon I learned to read the situation and became more efficient. We worked the entire line that way, turned around at the end, and started again.

There was one song that always went over especially well, and where our voices blended beautifully: *Mrs. Robinson* by Simon & Garfunkel. Without fail, it brought in the most money.

From then on, we played the metro once or twice a week. It was far more profitable than the street.

Walking home afterward, we were both elated. It worked - for both of us. We made a good team, instinctively attuned to each other. It felt as though we could conquer the world, if only in our imagination.

I liked being around him. He had a gentleness, a patient depth that radiated calm. That was why he had so many friends. They genuinely loved him.

Sometimes he surprised me with spontaneous gestures that touched me. Like the time he stopped a woman on the street to tell her she had a beautiful coat.

'That needed to be said,' he explained afterward, without

a hint of ulterior motive. It was disarming. He was at his best when he forgot himself.

Josh

Playing in the street might not bring in as much, but it gave me the greatest satisfaction. It was unpredictable, full of surprising and beautiful moments.

That's how I met Josh, an American trumpet player. He had hooked up a cassette deck to a little Pignose amp and played along with jazz standards he had recorded on tape.

Josh was Jewish and thoroughly disillusioned with his homeland. In his eyes, American politics was sliding toward fascism, and the endless wars involving the U.S. disgusted him. He never wanted to go back.

I told him I knew many jazz tunes and suggested we try playing together.

'Which ones?' he asked.

I pointed at the *Real Book* lying on the ground - the jazz musician's bible, packed with hundreds of standards - and told him I could play about anything in it. It was the Bb version for trumpet, but I could transpose to C on the fly. I mentioned that I had studied jazz guitar for several years, and that the *Real Book* had been the foundation of my lessons.

We played a few tunes together and quickly fell into sync. He'd state the theme, take a solo, then pass it to me. I laid down a walking bass line under the chords, adding rhythmic accents and variations. At the end, Josh returned to the theme to close the piece.

We had fun, and only stopped when his embouchure gave out. But jazz wasn't for everyone, and the money

reflected that. And if you had to split it as well, it hardly seemed worth the effort.

Still, we kept meeting up in the days that followed. Usually we'd play a few songs together before Josh went back to doing his own thing. After one of our sessions, I suggested we try the metro. I told him how well it had worked with Nils - surely we could make it work too. He liked the idea, and we agreed to meet the next day.

In the metro we did exactly what I had done with Nils: five metres apart, and play. But right away I noticed the atmosphere was completely different. With Nils I played familiar songs, with lyrics people recognised, melodies that drew them in. A trumpet was another matter.

Josh didn't have that smooth, round classical tone; his sound was raw, jagged, grinding its way up and down dissonant chords. Not necessarily pleasant to listen to. Some passengers even looked openly annoyed. That bothered me. I didn't want to feel unwelcome. We were already imposing ourselves on them, and if on top of that the music created discomfort, I had to wonder if we were doing the right thing.

The rejecting glances I sometimes got while passing the hat cut me to the core. After a few stops I told Josh this wasn't working. He understood, and we decided to quit.

It made me realise how fragile the life of a musician was. Talent, technique, passion - they weren't always decisive. You could study for years, play beautifully, and still draw hardly any attention.

Josh knew all that. But it didn't stop him. He loved playing in the street. There he could express himself, in his own way.

And attention - that was what Nils longed for most of all.

Ambitions

He had taken me in without a second thought, and I was genuinely grateful. His hospitality gave me an anchor, a place to rest, and the chance to find my way in Stockholm.

Since moving in we had spent long hours together in the flat, getting to know each other piece by piece. His inner stirrings also slowly came to the surface. Nils saw himself as an unrecognized talent. In his eyes, he deserved far more credit than life had given him. His voice - striking and distinctive - belonged, he thought, in the company of Swedish greats, alongside ABBA and others.

It soon became clear that Nils had a tendency to drink too much. When he did, he slid into melancholy, brooding over missed chances, hoping still for a miracle - a late breakthrough, the recognition he believed was his due.

In that fantasy, I too played a role. He thought I was slightly more skilled, and that my playing could lift his songs, help him shine. Together, he imagined, we might tip the balance.

For a few nights we worked on his songs. I layered the melodies, added harmonies, new textures. Instead of lifting him, it unsettled him. Irritation crept in; my input seemed to make him doubt himself even more.

What Nils needed was not a partner like me, but a producer - someone who believed in him, recorded him, even wrote songs for him. I was not that man.

He struggled with my indifference to career. For me, music was not an ambition, but a vehicle for adventure. He couldn't fathom that.

And yet I admired him. His magnetism, the natural ease of his singing, his complete surrender on stage - those

things I lacked. On the street or in a bar, people responded to him instantly. They were drawn in.

Still, it seemed not to be his fate. The dream drifted further away, as if It was meant for others, never for him.

Nils was nearing forty. 'Now or never,' he would say. Otherwise, too late. I felt a sense of responsibility. He had given me shelter, and I saw his struggle. But I didn't want to drown in his expectations.

Music, for him, was also a way of reaching people. He was no strategist; he loved human company. That was why he sang in the street - not for the coins, but for the connection.

He often complained that people in Sweden lived too shut off from each other. But once he sang, they opened, let him in.

Thinking of his ambitions, I wondered: what is the difference between a chance encounter in the street and a hall of adoring fans? Is it the affirmation, the applause, the proof you matter? Or is it the connection, the brief truth of being let into someone's world?

Nils dreamed of audiences, fame, success. But what if the dream remains out of reach? What then?

Are you worth less?

Meanwhile, reality pressed in. He cared little for money, yet it always caught up with him. Soon, he said, he might lose his flat to unpaid rent.

"How much?" I asked.

"Enough," he said.

He hoped for a little time to put things right.

I wondered if my presence steadied him - or if I was another weight he carried. We leaned on each other, but the balance was fragile.

The Wedding Reception

A gig was coming up. Nils had the right connections and was sometimes asked to provide the music for parties and gatherings. We had put together a set list - mostly his choices, the songs he loved to play, with me adapting myself to his lead.

Our debut was at a wedding reception, celebrating a couple's 25th anniversary. Nils knew them personally and introduced me as his musical partner. They gave us a spot in the corner of the hall, where we set up. He had a modest PA system, but it was more than enough for the space.

As usual, Nils stepped to the front. That was his natural stage, while I felt more at home behind my instrument.

We began with a few easy numbers to settle in. During that first set we were little more than wallpaper - music in the background, while people were still busy greeting, talking, drinking. I watched the guests carefully, curious whether I would notice cultural differences.

But in truth, I could as well have been back home: the same folksy warmth, food and drink in abundance, tipsy embraces, children running wild between the tables, climbing into people's laps. Someone suddenly raising a toast, a couple already dancing while the rest weren't ready for the floor.

As the party went on and the drinks began to take effect, the mood loosened. The dance floor grew crowded, laughter louder. Wallets came out more easily too, and now and then we found generous tips pressed into our hands.

Our playing meshed surprisingly well, even with songs we hadn't rehearsed together. Usually I accompanied while Nils carried the vocals. On choruses we sang together - it clicked.

Every so often I got to sing a tune. Sometimes I threw in a *mouth trumpet* imitation - a raspy trumpet sound that cut through the room. That sparked friction: Nils thought it was over the top; he preferred things clean and tight.

But I wouldn't hold back. The guests didn't seem to mind; a few even egged me on. It was a party - they were drunk, and they welcomed a bit of madness.

Later that night, back home, we counted the tips. I left the actual fee to Nils - he had landed the gig and provided the sound system. Besides, he needed the money more than I did.

Sexual Freedom

I met a girl who often visited Nils - Catrin. We started something together. It was a short romance, mostly physical. She was a free-spirited type, and I suspected I wasn't the only one she was seeing. In Sweden people seemed to take such things more lightly, or so it appeared to me.

In a hostel not far from us, where I sometimes went because it was a meeting place for budget travellers, worked an attractive North African boy. I was surprised by the freedom with which Swedish women allowed themselves to flirt with him. Sometimes they even openly asked him to have sex.

The boy, a practising Muslim, kept saying he would only sleep with a woman if she became his wife. He rejected them in a lighthearted and often funny way, which only made him more popular. Still, I wondered whether he could resist the temptation in the long run - he was young, and the women kept insisting.

I had never experienced women offering themselves so

openly. But in Sweden - or at least in Stockholm - that seemed quite normal.

Swedish Language

Catrin taught me a bit of Swedish. When I heard Swedes talk, I couldn't understand a thing. From the written language I could sometimes guess something - there were recognizable words in it.

One time we sat in Nils's kitchen and named the objects we saw: different kinds of food, cutlery, dishes, things on the counter and on the wall. She named everything in Swedish, I in Dutch. To my surprise, about seventy to eighty percent of the words matched - sometimes with a different sound or a small variation, but still understandable. I found that fascinating.

Later I did the same with Nils. Sitting on the couch with a beer, we pointed to as many things as possible to see if the words matched.

It was an extra advantage that I spoke Drents at home - a Low Saxon dialect whose sounds and intonation are even closer to Swedish than Dutch.

What I didn't know then was that in the Middle Ages the spoken language of the Hanseatic League was Middle Low German. That language is similar to Low Saxon. Because many Scandinavian cities were members of the Hanseatic League, about half of Swedish vocabulary would come from Middle Low German.

Probably the same was true for Danish and Norwegian. So it didn't seem too hard to learn the language. Not that I ever seriously considered it - everyone spoke English, and that was easier. You had to make an effort if you wanted to

master the language, and since I wasn't planning to stay long, it seemed pointless.

Cornelis Vreeswijk

In Sweden they also had a national hero. Every time I told a Swede I was from the Netherlands, they called out enthusiastically: 'Cornelis Vreeswiek!'

Vreeswijk was a Dutch/Swedish folk singer who had moved to Sweden in his youth and had become an icon there. His songs, and especially his original use of the Swedish language, established him as a major figure. Later they even declared a memorial day for him.

But it wasn't only his music and lyrics that made him so loved. His image and the tragedy of his life also struck a sensitive chord with many Swedes.

Someone once told me: 'He took upon himself the suffering of a people - and made it visible to the whole nation.'

Street Fight

On a square in the shopping area - a place where I often made music and that was always a source of income for me - a boy with a guitar came up to me. He asked if we could play together, in a tone that sounded more demanding than friendly. I wasn't too keen on it. I tried to shake him off, but he wouldn't give up.

Without paying me any further attention, he took out his guitar, set his case down, flipped it open, and launched into it. It was clear he had no idea about the unwritten rule among street musicians: you respect each other's spot.

I ordered him to stop immediately and move on, but he

wouldn't. I put my guitar down, moved in and planted myself in front of his face. A fierce argument followed, and then we went at each other.

It escalated to the point where a bystander thought the police should be called and went to look for them. Cops were coming through the street all the time, so they'd likely arrive soon. Then someone else warned us they could appear any second.

For an instant we froze, then broke apart. The fight was over in a heartbeat. Dust brushed from our clothes, guitars clutched tight, we slipped back into the roles of innocent buskers. Barely composed, the police appeared.

They said they had been called because of a fight and asked if we had anything to do with it. We knew nothing about it - we said we had been playing here the whole time. They looked at us suspiciously but couldn't do much. After some looks and some back-and-forth talking they left again.

We were so relieved that we hugged each other. Afterwards we played some songs together - thanks to the healing effect of authority.

Farewell

The incident was like a mirror of the moment. Hidden feelings - vague, hard to define - were looking for a way to the surface. They wanted to be heard, but consciousness wasn't ready yet.

It was the same between Nils and me. The best was over. What once felt natural began rub. I regretted it. I respected him a lot. But I felt increasingly burdened by staying in his flat. I slowly withdrew - not physically, but in my thoughts. In my head I was already somewhere else, even while I still sat across from him at the table.

We had tried, Nils and I. But what he hoped to find in our cooperation never took off. Something hung between us - unspoken but tangible. That I hadn't been able to meet his expectations weighed on me. But I was also a beginning musician.

The atmosphere got heavier. And while Nils held on to what was there, my urge for something new grew. Change. Adventure. It was time to move on. I told him. He nodded slowly and said It was probably for the best. But he suggested we do one last performance together - as a farewell, and so that I would have some money for my departure.

But that gig was only scheduled for a week and a half later, and I knew I couldn't stay that long. I thanked him for the offer. His disappointment was clear, even if he didn't say it. He still had space left, while I had already left inwardly. For me the moment had come. After almost two months under his roof, I took the ferry to Helsinki.

Helsinki

The journey felt like a sudden shift. Only hours earlier I had said goodbye in a plain living room, and now I was standing on a ship cutting through the Baltic Sea, surrounded by travellers hungry for distraction.

On board there was a nightclub, with a DJ playing all night. The air was smoky and thick, the room low-ceilinged and square, mirrors on the walls pretending it was larger than it was. Coloured lights - red, blue, green - turned lazily across the floor, casting flashes on faces already glistening with sweat and alcohol. The floor trembled softly to the bass of a synth-pop track by A-ha or The Human League.

Along the edges of the dance floor, groups of Finns and

Swedes sat at small round tables, beer cans and vodka glasses in front of them, some boisterous, others staring in silence. On the floor, men in denim jackets and women with teased hair and shoulder pads were only beginning to move.

The DJ, hidden in his booth, switched between cassette and vinyl, sometimes with a clumsy transition that no one seemed to mind. Everyone was in transit, strangers to one another - and that gave the night a light, carefree air.

The alcohol flowed freely, cheaper here because of the low taxes, and everyone took advantage of it. Some had boarded only to party, planning to return on the next boat.

Wild-and oddly fun. But what struck me was how differently people drank here: not for companionship, but for the sole purpose of getting drunk. By the end of the night, most could barely stand. Some had to be carried off to their cabins.

I hadn't booked one. When the bar closed and the hall emptied, I crawled into my sleeping bag on one of the benches where we had been sitting. A few others were already asleep there, which reassured me. At least I didn't feel like I was breaking the rules.

When I left the boat the next morning, the sky was grey and a mist hung over the docks. The damp air fogged my helmet visor. The harbor lay wide and still, heavy with the smell of wet timber stacked high for shipment.

In the centre of Helsinki, tram wires stretched like steel nets above the broad avenues. The buildings were painted in muted colours, dulled by the overcast light. I passed modest shops with simple displays along the neat, straight streets. The city looked orderly, restrained, contained.

Frida

By the afternoon I wanted to play. I tried my luck in a large indoor shopping mall. Such places often had wonderful acoustics - but the downside was that shopkeepers tended to complain. I was curious how it would go in Finland.

The sound delighted me. I didn't need to play loudly to be heard. Everything was clear, defined, intimate. When you're in the flow, when you forget time and let yourself be carried by the rhythm, the money comes by itself - or at least that was my experience. And if it didn't, it didn't matter; you had enjoyed yourself anyway. This time the money came easily, and the shopkeepers made no objection.

After about an hour a girl my age lingered nearby, watching. When I finished a song she came over and struck up a conversation. She said there weren't many street musicians in Helsinki, and she liked running into one. She was open and spontaneous. A little plump, with dark curls and a round face scattered with pimples. Not strikingly beautiful, but warm, genuine, and curious.

She asked where I was staying. I admitted I hadn't thought about that yet. Without hesitation she offered me a place at her apartment - a gift from heaven. For a moment I considered playing a bit longer, but the prospect was too exciting. She said I could come right away.

I couldn't ride with her - I had my motorbike. So she gave me her address and phone number, and even pulled a map from a shop, marking her place with a cross. She took the bus and said she'd be home within half an hour.

She lived in a suburb, third floor of a whitewashed apartment block. When I rang the bell she was already waiting.

Inside was simple: a big sofa, hardly any other furniture,

but the room felt open with a large front window. Near it, on a stand, stood a big plant, and a few posters hung on the walls.

We ate together and made ourselves comfortable. She told me her parents were of Swedish descent, though she had always lived in Helsinki. Only her name - Frida - betrayed her roots across the water. She spoke both languages fluently, and English came easily to her as well.

We drank wine and talked until the early hours. That night I stayed on the couch.

The next day was Saturday, and she didn't have to work. We slept in, having agreed the night before to go into the city and play together.

In the afternoon we took the bus to the mall. I showed her how I chose a place: first the sound - so both the audience and I heard clearly; then the background noise - never too loud or chaotic. But in the end you only knew after you tried. When I stayed longer in a city, I'd test several places.

Frida was fascinated and eager to help. Once we found a good spot she asked if she could take part. That was easy enough: grab a cup and kindly ask passersby for a small contribution. The earnings were split. That's how it worked. I knew from experience that people gave more readily when you approached them openly. A simple request with a smile worked best. It might sound easy, but It was a skill of its own. Some turned it into a show, others did it halfheartedly, or struggled to engage at all.

There were also figures who didn't play an instrument, but merely collected money for the street artists. Nothing wrong with that, as long as they respected the unspoken rules. But the worst offence was '*deep tanking*': skimming off more than your share. That only had to happen once - anyone caught was finished, not only with me but with

every street musician in town. Stealing from a fellow busker was unforgivable.

Frida threw herself into the role. She found a paper cup and worked the crowd brilliantly - dancing, bowing, charming them into giving. A talent was born. She made people laugh, and laughter is always the best way to fill the hat.

Her appearance made her stand out. She wore a long black dress with a white collar, her face painted in gothic style - pale powder, black lipstick, darkened eyes. A morbid look. Yet each time someone passed, her face lit up with a radiant smile - as if she rose joyfully from the dead over and over.

Business was good. When we were done, we could easily pay for our groceries and even have a beer somewhere. Alcohol was outrageously expensive in Finland, so we were careful where to go. Frida knew a bar outside the centre with friendlier prices and mostly locals.

We caught the bus and entered a large, bare hall. At a heavy wooden table sat men and women with stoic expressions, drinking their beer. Nearer the bar were a few small round tables, where we took a seat.

The place exuded a strange calm. No chatter, no background noise. The walls were thick wooden planks, small windows letting in the last traces of daylight across half-filled glasses and somber faces. Heads barely moved as they lifted their drinks.

The worn floor creaked under every step toward the bar. Behind it stood a towering figure with long dark hair and an equally long beard - he reminded me of Rasputin. He, too, wrapped himself in silence.

When we left, we carried the atmosphere with us into the night. The streets lay deserted, our footsteps the only

sound. Along the way a sense grew between us that we had shared something unusual, as though we had crossed a hidden line together. We were happy, as if we had overcome something.

That evening we became intimate, and I slept in her big bed.

Strained Expectations

On Sunday we stayed home and took a long walk through the neighborhood. Frida was fired up about street playing and wanted to travel with me. She considered taking leave from work to join me on tour.

But I knew at once it wasn't a good idea. Playing lasted only a few hours a day - the rest of the time you had to get along. I doubted we would. I tried to imagine it. Two people on one motorbike? Impossible. Meeting up in different towns? Also impractical. But deeper than logistics, I feared losing my freedom. Always having to take someone else into account - I didn't want that.

We had a good time together. Still, something gnawed at me. I wasn't in love, and without that, everything seemed pointless. The first cracks were showing. Frida was rather dominant, and I disliked that. She reminded me of my mother: kind, but bossy.

At the same time I hesitated. I should go with the flow. If it fell apart, it fell apart - so what? But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

She had already called off work - or reported sick - to spend more time with me. That only made things worse. In the days that followed, she kept pressing to travel with me. If not, then at least a short holiday together - one she would pay for.

But I couldn't accept that. The thought of her covering all expenses offended my pride. She didn't understand - she thought it was only practical. But for me it was the opposite.

We sensed each other less and less, and there wasn't much left but for me to leave again. The air grew colder, the first snow had already arrived. As the Swedish man at the campsite had predicted: winter came early here.

Parting wasn't easy. Frida made one last attempt to change my mind, but my decision was firm. We both knew we would probably never meet again.

I took the boat back to Stockholm and rode straight through to Denmark. I stayed in Copenhagen for a day, then continued on to Germany. My goal was Switzerland, where I had friends.

EDGE EFFECT: LIFE AT THE EDGES

PERMACULTURE, FREAKS,
AND A DRIFTER'S PARADISE

Hanover Stopover

By the time I rolled into Hanover on my motorcycle, the night was already closing in. Music was the last thing on my mind. I was drenched, worn out, and the rain had been relentless, pounding the road and my patience alike. At a petrol station I ducked inside for a quick break, refilled the tank, and admitted what my body already knew: this day had reached its end. Now I needed food. And shelter.

Shops were shuttered. Hunger gnawed as I drifted through the streets, until a small bar appeared, with a guest-house attached. Fortune smiled twice at once. A warm meal, a bed - I could stretch my dwindling budget that far.

Earlier that day I had exchanged all my leftover coins and bills - Finnish marks, Swedish and Danish kronor - at the ferry in Puttgarden. Enough German marks to carry me to Switzerland. After that, I would see.

Permaculture

The guesthouse could wait. First came food, and a beer to wash it down. Inside, the bar hummed with voices. That's where I met Gerdt, a gardener with bright eyes and the patience of someone who lives close to the soil.

He spoke of *permaculture*, a word I had never heard, yet once spoken it seemed to open a hidden door in my mind. We lost track of time in the telling. He was relieved, to finally pour out his passion.

Permaculture, he explained, was not about bending nature to your will, but working with it - listening to its strength, using its rhythms. The aim was not only to feed yourself, but to shape an ecosystem that nourishes the land, the people, and the wild around it.

I thought of my father. He would have cherished this. Long before it was fashionable, he practised his own form of organic gardening. He refused to dig the earth, preferring to leave the soil's order undisturbed. Weeds hardly bothered him. He gave young plants a little space at first, but after that they were on their own. Only when chaos threatened to consume the garden did he intervene.

In the village, people mocked him. They saw only disorder where they expected neat rows of bare, black soil. 'The biologist,' they sneered, as if the word itself was madness. But my father never wavered. He knew the quiet logic beneath it all.

Permaculture went a step further still. It sought not gardens, but lives woven seamlessly into nature's fabric - food, water, wood, even energy flowing from a design attuned to the land itself.

It was a revelation to me: not only had people imagined

such a way of living, but they had found ways to make it real.

A Job

As the evening wound down and the first guests pushed back their chairs, Gerdt leaned toward me with an unexpected offer: would I like to work with him? He had a few projects on the edges of Hanover, laying out gardens shaped by the principles of permaculture. The idea appealed to me immediately. But first things first - I needed a place to sleep.

The guesthouse was already full. My fault. I'd stayed too long in the café, caught up in conversation and warmth, forgetting the practicalities of the night. By the time of it, every bed was gone.

Once again, Gerdt had an answer. I could stay that night with him and his girlfriend, around the corner. And after that, he promised, there was the shed - a place he rented on an industrial lot. Quiet, secluded, and in his words, 'comfortable enough.'

The Shed

It didn't take long to see that his girlfriend was less than thrilled with the idea. She muttered sharp words his way, the kind that carried the weight of old quarrels. Clearly, I wasn't the first stray traveller he had brought home. But it was late, and beyond an overpriced hotel, there were no other options. She gave in, though her silence said everything.

The next morning I was relieved to leave. She remained frosty, eager to be rid of us. The shed, though - the shed was

perfect. It looked almost like a makeshift bar: one side half open, with a wooden plank stretched across a frame, as if ready to serve drinks. A chipboard flap could be pulled down to close it.

Inside, chaos reigned, but by shoving aside the clutter I carved out a corner for myself. Cushions from foldable garden chairs were stacked neatly along the wall. I laid a few on the floor, slipped cardboard underneath to keep out the cold, and I had a bed - off the ground, simple, but enough.

That day Gerdt let me drift, and promised that tomorrow we would begin my first job.

That evening, though, it became clear the shed would not be mine alone. Gerdt arrived with a bucket of shrimp, a gift from a fishmonger. He'd taken them home first, but the smell had driven his girlfriend to fury. When he asked her to peel them, it was too much. She threw him out, told him to fend for himself - and the shed became his exile too.

He laughed at her anger, shrugged as if it were nothing new.

'She'll calm down,' he said.

He came armed with pots and pans, cutlery, a few herbs, and a tin of salt. In the corner stood a gas burner, a water tap close at hand. We began peeling shrimp. They were tiny things, endless, a whole bucket of them. Too many. We could never finish. And to save them was hopeless - the smell already told us so. Still, Gerdt insisted they were fine, and when I tasted them, I had to admit: they were delicious.

By morning the stench was unbearable. A pale froth had formed on their surface. Gerdt suggested we might stretch them another day, then sighed and gave up. With a single motion he carried the bucket outside and tipped it onto the compost heap.

Helmut

We rose early the next morning. Before we could begin, we had to collect Helmut, the man who handled the crane Gerdt hauled on the back of his open van. At seven sharp we arrived. Helmut sat at the breakfast table with his wife, a half-empty stein of beer in front of him. We waited while he took his time with his meal. Before stepping outside, he tossed back a couple of miniature bottles of schnapps, one after another. I cast Gerdt a questioning glance, but he betrayed no reaction.

At a spacious home in a quiet suburb we unloaded the gear. The garden, nearly three hundred square metres, was to be transformed according to a design centered on the *edge effect*.

Permaculture teaches that wherever ecosystems meet, life multiplies. Along a riverbank, creatures of water and land coexist. At the edge of a forest, species that love sun mingle with those that crave shadow. These thresholds are where diversity flourishes, where two worlds overlap.

Gerdt wove this principle into all his plans. Sometimes in small gestures: a winding path, a pile of branches. Other times in deliberate constructions - dry-stone walls that soaked up the day's heat and released it at night, their crevices offering refuge to insects, their warmth coaxing fragile plants to thrive. Always, the edges held the promise of abundance.

The Herb Spiral

Helmut was digging out a pond, and I lent a hand until Gerdt assigned me a task of my own: building a herb spiral. The rest of the day was mine to shape it.

What's beautiful about a herb spiral is that it brings together several permaculture principles, such as the *edge effect* and the creation of microclimates. The spiral form itself is universal, a slow coil of earth and stone where gradients of light, moisture and soil emerge in a single structure. At its base, a tiny pond gathers water. Higher up, the soil dries. At the top, stones and lime render the ground sparse, perfect for herbs that thrive on hardship.

The key was the foundation. Without it, the heavy mass of earth and stone would eventually sink, collapsing its own design. I had Helmut dig half a metre down, filled it with gravel, capped it with soil, and began the upward turn of the spiral, stone by stone sketching its outline.

By late morning, when I needed more soil, I went to fetch Helmut. He was slumped in the cab of the crane, asleep. On a hook hung a plastic bag, with several empty schnapps bottles underneath. I told Gerdt. He looked once, then shrugged.

'Let him sleep. Nothing we can do now.'

It baffled me. In any other line of work, a man like that would be dismissed on the spot. But Gerdt accepted it without a murmur. Helmut did not show up again for the rest of the day.

That evening, Gerdt explained. Helmut had stood by him for years. To strip him of his work, when drink had already stripped him of so much else, would be cruelty. He wouldn't do it. I admired his compassion, but given my practical nature and the experiences from my working life, I struggled to understand.

Experimental garden

Beside the shed, Gerdt tended his own patch of earth - a permaculture garden that doubled as a laboratory for his ideas. He scattered bones across the soil, along with worn-out jeans, old shoes, animal blood, and other unlikely ingredients. Over it all he spread a thick quilt of straw, beneath which potatoes swelled, untouched by the ground itself.

The method wasn't entirely alien to me. Frans Marsman employed a comparable approach. According to him, those unusual additives created a "shock effect" that jolted the soil and reactivated it.

Gerdt showed me how he could "*pluck*" his potatoes as if they were fruit. He pushed back the straw and there they lay - clusters of clean, full-grown tubers, ready for the pan. He pulled a few for supper.

The taste... unforgettable. Dense, earthy, rich - I can't recall eating potatoes before or since that matched them.

Casanova

Gerdt juggled several jobs. One day here, another there. Helmut only joined when there was digging to be done. Between Gerdt and me, a quiet bond formed. I liked working for him. And since his girlfriend still barred him from the house, we spent much of our time together - at work, and well beyond it.

Away from the gardens, Gerdt revealed another side of himself.

He was in his fifties, no taller than one metre fifty-five, with the air of a woodland gnome: short and sturdy, small arms, a face weathered and knotted, always topped with the

same little hat. In the car he sat so close to the wheel it looked as though he were clinging to it, the seat jammed forward to reach the pedals.

By common measures he was anything but handsome. Yet women seemed drawn to him. He radiated a charm that erased his flaws. He was rarely without a lover. Most were foreign women, widowed or divorced, whom he visited now and then.

Once I accompanied him to meet one of them. The woman's joy at his arrival was unmistakable. He teased lightly, listened with patience, and let his hand rest gently on hers. Watching him was like watching a quiet art - tender, alluring, disarming. I wondered if his girlfriend had any idea.

Time to Go

Gerdt continued to share the shed with me, sometimes vanishing into the night, only to appear at the door again by morning. His girlfriend was never mentioned, and I didn't press the matter.

Now and then Miriam, the young intern, joined us. She was barely twenty, brimming with enthusiasm for permaculture. With her in the mix, and Helmut in his more sober moments, we made an unlikely but good team.

But after a month the itch returned. The road was calling again. As I embraced Miriam one last time, tears welled in her eyes. She brushed them away quickly, forcing a brave smile. For an instant I faltered - perhaps I should have stayed.

Her sorrow and my hesitation rode with me, clinging for a while longer, until the wind and the growl of the engine

swept them aside. I was on my way to Switzerland, to the Freakhotel - a place where I had lived for almost nine months a year and a half earlier.

The Freakhotel

It began in Amsterdam, when I met a Swiss guy who had been robbed and was left without any money. He asked if I could help him with the fuel costs for his journey home. I didn't have much cash either, but I offered to let him drive me back to my place, so I could lend him the money there. On the way, he casually asked if I wanted to come with him to Switzerland. The idea appealed to me immediately.

Once there, he took me along to visit a friend. She lived above an abandoned factory in the village of Herzogenbuchsee. A group of free spirits had turned the space into a place to live. The atmosphere struck me right away. Not long after, I asked if I could stay.

That's how my time at the Freakhotel began.

It was a sanctuary for dreamers, makers, and misfits: no locked doors, no suffocating rules. Self-reliance and mutual respect were all you needed. Everything was built by hand: furniture out of scrap wood, a kitchen pieced together from thrift-store leftovers, plumbing salvaged from the trash. No heating, no hot water, no washing machine - but there was fire, friendship, and a zest for life.

The air smelled of wood smoke, spiced stews, and paint. Everywhere you looked: messy beauty - half-finished paintings, sculptures taking shape, instruments scattered across the floor. At night there was singing, laughter, steam rising from a makeshift sauna, and music was made late into the night.

The sauna was nothing more than a wooden frame, draped with woolen blankets, with a roaring wood stove in the middle. We sat there, naked and shoulder to shoulder, dripping with sweat, the fire barely ten centimeters away. Irresponsible, perhaps, but no one seemed to care. Afterwards we'd plunge into ice-cold water to cool off.

On one of their regular scavenging trips, they found an antique washing machine. They hauled it home and set it up on top of the bathtub. It worked without electricity.

First, water was heated on the stove and poured into the bottom chamber. Then the drum was loaded with dirty clothes, the lid closed, and the cranking began - a handle on the side that you kept turning until the clothes came out clean. About an hour's work.

Two or three of us would sit on the edge of the tub, sharing a fat charas joint, taking turns at the handle. Laundry day became a ritual - practical, but also oddly festive.

Trash collection didn't exist. At night, under cover of darkness, we'd climb a wall and dump our bags into the neighbours' bins. Toilet paper we 'borrowed' from public buildings, most of the time unnoticed. It didn't always go smoothly; sometimes we ran out.

International

The house was full of a colourful mix of people from everywhere. Spanish, German, French, and English were spoken interchangeably. Yamina and her sister Chiara spoke Spanish, but switched effortlessly into German. Two Argentine women - open, carefree, anything but prudish.

Margot, from Bern, lived there with her Portuguese

boyfriend Diogo. They spoke French together, but with us he spoke English. Margot's four-year-old daughter, Soraya, thrived among all the madness, perfectly at home in the chaos.

Then there were Bädu, Tobi, and Jaro, who spoke Bernese German among themselves - a dialect that at first was completely incomprehensible to me. It sounded almost Scandinavian. Slowly I began catch bits and pieces. With me, they usually spoke High German.

Odd jobs and creative living

Everyone was creative: painting, making music, cooking, welding, hammering, spinning, trying things out. Each had their own small stream of income, and because life was simple, large expenses were rarely needed. Work came easily. Sometimes a local builder dropped by, looking for cheap hands. Whoever was free went along. Other times I'd hop on a bike and cycle past the nearby farms - they usually put me to work straight away.

Parties and music

The parties were the stuff of legend. Loud, wild, unforgettable. Always with live bands and performers. The space was dressed up for the night, filled with handmade props and strange decorations. We spread word with our own posters and flyers: *Freakhotel Party*. People poured in from everywhere, even across the border in Germany. The place was always packed with new faces. The parties also raised money for projects in Nicaragua, something Jaro was passionate about. In fact, during much of my stay he was mostly in Central America.

Every Wednesday we held a jam session called '*Sanibananabana*'. Friends from outside came to play along. No barriers, no judgment - music. There were drums and percussion everywhere, mostly played by women. I stuck mostly to guitar, joined by a bassist and a drummer. What struck me was that people kept coming back. They loved it. We even played at the big parties.

Freedom and friction

The atmosphere was overwhelmingly positive. Everyone pushed each other to create, to try, to make something. It didn't matter what, as long as it was alive and original. Of course, free spirits sometimes collide. Personalities clashed. But fights never lasted. The air always cleared quickly.

That's when I noticed something different about the Swiss - or at least about the Freakhotel crew. They dealt with each other more carefully, more patiently than I was used to. Nobody was cast out or harshly judged, even if someone drifted into antisocial moods for a while. Most things were quietly forgiven.

Maybe it was cultural: life in mountain valleys, where you can't escape each other and must find a way to get along.

Unpleasant surprises

Because of all the encounters with women from outside, I sometimes had a girlfriend. One day, though, I started itching badly down below. Looking closer, I saw tiny bugs crawling through my pubic hair. That couldn't be good. I asked Bädu what to do.

'Ah, crabs,' he shrugged. 'Bit of ointment, you'll be fine.'

He made it sound like nothing. I got the ointment, and sure enough - a few hours later they were gone.

Margot and Diogo

I also started seeing Margot. Diogo didn't take it well. They had split up, but he was still in love. For me It was simple: once it's over, you're free. But Diogo saw it differently. In his eyes Margot was still his wife, regardless of what she thought herself.

After the break-up Margot moved to Bern with her daughter Soraya. One night, when I visited her in her flat in Lorraine, we suddenly saw Diogo at the window. He had climbed all the way up to spy on us.

Back at the Freakhotel, he challenged me to a duel. A duel to the death. I could choose the weapons. The winner would get Margot.

At first I laughed it off, thinking he was joking. But he wasn't. He was dead serious. He'd even set a date - sometime in December. Later I learned It was his birthday.

When I told Yamina, she laughed.

'Oh, er ist so romantisch.'

The Faces

Many of the sparks came from Bädu, a natural-born maker. Trained as a carpenter, but above all an artist and musician. He had crashed in the regular school system, but at an alternative school - where creativity mattered more than grades - he thrived. That's where his real gifts came out.

After travelling through South America he was arrested in France for carrying something the authorities didn't like. Prison followed. Life on the outside wasn't easy after that.

The label 'ex-convict' stuck to him. At the Freakhotel everyone knew, but nobody cared. They looked at Bädu the person - and that was enough. Here, he could quietly rebuild his life.

With his big ego and natural stage presence, he and his brother Jannik started a band: *Ghost Town Window Shoppers*. At first they played covers, rehearsing in the Freakhotel and performing there too. Bädu often asked me to write down English lyrics from records - since I understood them better. Later they switched to their own songs, written in Bernese dialect - Mundart, as they called it. Soon they were touring all over Switzerland.

Yamina stood out in a different way. She was the eldest, the only one at university, and for me something of a mother figure. She sensed tension instantly and knew when to step in, with a word that cut to the heart of things. I respected her deeply. She kept the spirit of the place alive - the ideas, the shared vision. While others got lost in personal troubles, she kept perspective, and brought order when things spun out of control.

At the same time, she craved male warmth. For her, sexual freedom wasn't up for debate - it was simply part of life. If you wanted to be with her, you had to accept she would also be with others. If you couldn't, then it was over.

Her openness took me aback. It was confronting. What would it be like, I wondered, to love someone and know you weren't enough? That must be terrible. That's not how it's supposed to be. But that was my truth. Hers was different.

Her sister Chiara I only knew briefly. She was with Antonio, a percussionist from South America who often played at our parties. Then she left for Brazil to live on a piece of land with others. I moved into the room she left behind.

Diogo was a true music lover. He always brought up

artists I'd never heard of, usually from South America. He was fascinated by that region, inspired by its native peoples and also by Eastern philosophy. At the Freakhotel he sometimes performed ritual dances - mesmerizing to watch. After his break with Margot he eventually moved to Northern Germany, where he had a child with a woman.

Jaro devoted himself to the poor in Nicaragua. Through Freakhotel parties he raised money to fund building projects there. He was usually away for long stretches. I only met him a few times. Shortly after one return from Nicaragua, he vanished again.

Tobi preferred the background. I found it hard to connect with him. He seemed detached from the rest of the Freakhotel crowd, spending most of his time alone in his room, tinkering in silence. I sometimes pitied him. Despite his talent and dedication, he never seemed to take his work seriously, always placing it in the shadow of others.

Bädu had the most influence on him. He reassured him, showed real appreciation, and those moments lit him up. At parties, he was someone else entirely - suddenly the joker, absurd, unpredictable, hilarious. His performances had the whole room laughing, as if a hidden light had suddenly switched on inside him.

Margot

Margot was the one I felt most at ease with. We understood each other well, and I liked being around her. After our brief romance, we stayed friends. She had a gift for atmosphere. Her home radiated warmth and calm. With scents, candlelight, and soft music she created a space where you naturally came back to yourself.

She had grown up in an ordinary family - working father, homemaker mother. She was expected to follow the same path, but she felt no love in it, only expectations. Her free spirit wouldn't fit inside that box. She was drawn to the hippie movement, and had seen the film *Hair* at least ten times in the cinema. There had to be something more - some elusive longing that hovered out of reach.

Much to her parents' disappointment, she dropped out of nursing school at twenty and moved to Zurich with her Egyptian boyfriend, Omar. A year later she was pregnant - from an Arab. *Good grief; as if that weren't enough.* That was the final straw. From then on she was the lost daughter. Her parents wanted nothing to do with their grandchild either, let alone help raise it.

The Freakhotel was different. When her relationship with Omar ended and she joined this ragtag band of free spirits, a new world opened. The dream she had longed for was real here. These people loved freedom, didn't judge, and simply did what they loved. *It's possible,* she thought. *It exists.* At last, she could live life on her own terms.

The Freakhotel wasn't a place - it was a state of mind. A messy, warm, chaotic dream where you could be yourself, unfiltered. The outside world? For a while, it simply didn't exist.

Where a Chapter Ends

All of that was still not so long ago. I missed them and was curious to know how everyone was doing by now. I wanted to go there immediately, but the journey from Hannover to Herzogenbuchsee - about 800 kilometres - couldn't be done in a single day.

The following evening I arrived at the Freakhotel. When I knocked on the door, a woman I didn't know opened it. She told me that everyone who had lived there before had since moved on. Most of them now lived in Bern, she said, but she didn't have any addresses.

"Go to the Reithalle," she added. "You'll be sure to run into them there."

It hit me like a blow. A door closing, a chapter ending - even a whole book. A real disappointment.

And yet, in her words There was also a spark of hope. I had no idea what awaited me there, but the thought that there was a place where I might find them again gave me something to hold on to. I already knew the Reithalle: big, unpredictable, alive with movement. It might be the beginning of something new.

Reithalle

The Reithalle was a colossal structure in the middle of the city. A raw stronghold of alternative culture, anarchist energy, and *do-it-yourself* ideals. Once it had served as stables and a riding hall for the city's carriages, until motor traffic made it obsolete. After years of abandonment it was occupied by a colourful mix of artists, activists, and politically driven youth. Inside and out, the place pulsed with a constant state of creative rebellion.

When I arrived, the courtyard was buzzing with people standing in groups, talking and drinking. Graffiti was everywhere - not tags, but political slogans, surreal murals, visual statements against the establishment. The heavy air smelled of smoke, beer, and weed.

Truck tyres lined one wall, transformed into planters

overflowing with shrubs and draped with strings of coloured lights. Huge canvases painted with artwork hung like banners from the roof gutter nearly to the ground, swaying gently in the evening air against the courtyard wall. Inside, on the first floor, a ska band played at full tilt.

That's something you have to hand to the Swiss: they know how to organise and cooperate. In a short time, they had turned a crumbling building into a space fit for concerts, exhibitions, meetings, parties, and political actions.

The first priority had been the concert hall upstairs. No entrance fee was charged - visitors could contribute voluntarily. Along with bar sales, it was enough to buy materials and pay craftspeople. That system worked: they managed to make the leaky roof wind- and watertight, one of the biggest obstacles. After that, the rest followed. Skilled workers took the lead, artists were free to give shape in their own way.

I asked a few people if they knew Bädu - the one I was looking for. Sure, they knew him. He often played here with his band, and was a well-known figure in the scene. Someone even knew where he lived - in the Q-Hof in Lorraine, not far from here..

At his apartment the door was closed. In the courtyard I spoke to some people, who told me he was on holiday in Cuba. But, they said, if you're looking for a place to sleep, we've got a spare room.

Perfect.

A woman led me up to an attic room with nothing but a bed and a chair - but I didn't need more. 'You can stay here a while,' she said. 'No need to rush off tomorrow.'

That was what I needed. I could take my time to look up other old friends.

But things turned out differently. What was meant as a fresh start began with a strange sound from the engine.

Motorcycle Trouble

I went in search of a motorcycle garage to find out what was wrong. That turned out to be harder than. To repair BMW motorcycles you needed a special licence, and few garages had it. In Copenhagen I'd been lucky: I happened to meet someone authorized to work on it. Here, I had to search.

Eventually I found a garage. The owner explained he once had the licence, but it had been unjustly revoked. The reason, he said, was a dispute over payment, not the quality of his work. He assured me he still had everything it took - knowledge, experience, tools - to fix my bike.

After half a day of fruitless searching, I thought: I don't really have another choice.

We agreed he would first investigate the problem. Then we could decide. The next day I returned. The gearbox, he said, had to be replaced. Cost: around 2,500 CHF. I was stunned. I didn't have that money - and no idea how I'd ever get it. My world collapsed. I was done. The bike was no longer a symbol of freedom, but a weight around my neck. The whole dream was an illusion. How on earth was I supposed to solve this? That amount, for that damn machine. I felt cheated, though I knew it didn't make sense. It had been my choice. But how would I get out of this swamp? Every way out seemed blocked. Hopeless. I couldn't decide. I told him I'd think it over and promised to return the next day. That night I made a plan. I would leave it up to fate.

The next morning I proposed this: he would repair the bike, while I left the country. When I came back, I'd pay. If I

never returned, he could keep the bike. That way I could emotionally detach from it - and from the frustrations of my shattered dream. Later I could always decide to reclaim it.

He agreed. We set no time frame - I had no idea when, or even *if*, I would return. But he reassured me. There was plenty of space to store the bike. I needn't worry about that.

When I pulled the garage door shut behind me, I left not only my motorbike but a part of myself, a dream. The freedom of two wheels had given way to the sober realization that possessions can be a heavy burden. What remained was what I could carry.

The French Family

I left Bern. Winter was setting in, and I longed for the south, where it was still warm. I carried only the essentials: my sleeping bag, guitar, some underwear, toiletries, a pocket New Testament, and a slim work by D.T. Suzuki on Zen Buddhism. The rest I had left behind in the garage.

With a stripped-down version of my plan, I moved on. And to be honest, it felt like a relief. Shedding that weight gave me a surprising sense of freedom. I had a choice: I could always return - but I didn't have to. I set out hitchhiking. At first the weather was fine, but as I got closer to France, it began to snow. Someone dropped me off in a small village across the border. The snow thickened. Walking along the roadside was no joy - the spray from cars and the slush of melting snow made it heavy going. At the edges lay thick strips of dirty, brown-grey ice.

Darkness fell. The cold crept slowly into me. My socks were soaked, my shoes squelched with every step. When it was nearly dark, a car suddenly stopped. The driver opened the door without a word. He didn't ask where I was heading.

Warm air poured out like an invitation. Without hesitation, I climbed in.

With my guitar wedged between my knees and my backpack on the back seat, we drove on. The man - small, slightly hunched, both hands firmly on the wheel - spoke only French. It was awkward. With broken phrases and half-remembered words from school and vacations, I tried to explain that I was heading to the coast, toward the warmth.

'Côte d'Azur, c'est bien,' he said. From his tone, I could tell he wished he were going there too.

We spent most of the drive in silence. About ten kilometers later, near his house, he suddenly asked if I was hungry. If I wanted, I could eat - and sleep there too, he added. Considering the weather and the pitch-black night, I gratefully accepted.

Inside, the kitchen glowed with warmth and light. His wife and two teenage daughters were busy with dinner. At once I felt that my presence wasn't welcome. His wife looked surprised, even annoyed. Bringing home a stranger was bad enough - but to have me stay the night was clearly too much.

During dinner, she kept voicing her displeasure in sharp tones. He tried to calm her. *Where had I seen that before?* He stayed calm, gesturing toward the window, as if to say you couldn't possibly leave someone out in such weather.

Meanwhile, the two daughters watched me curiously, studying me without saying a word. After the meal, I thought I might break the ice with some songs on my guitar. I pointed to it and asked if I might play. He nodded eagerly but said the table had to be cleared and the dishes washed first. Then, yes.

Sadly, I knew no French chansons - pity, because then we could have sung together. So I had to settle for songs

they probably didn't know. A small performance, in an unfamiliar living room, for an audience unsure what to make of me.

At such moments, it's hard to strike the right chord. Music can lift a mood if it lands well, but if it doesn't, the atmosphere can sour quickly. The girls sat silent and tense. I chose safe ground and started with *Mrs. Robinson*. It worked. The atmosphere lightened. Then I played a few more accessible songs.

Slowly, the girls began relax. One pulled the other from the couch, and soon they were dancing - shyly at first, then more freely. The ice was broken. Even the wife seemed to soften. Her eyes lost their sharpness, her posture less rigid. I had achieved my goal. The mood had shifted, and I could finally breathe again. The tension that had gripped me was gone. With a few songs, I had turned a cold evening into warmth and openness. In silence, I thanked the Lord for this small gift.

When the girls went to bed, the three of us drank a glass of wine. Later the man showed me to my room and wished me a gentle *bon nuit*. My wet clothes were drying by the stove.

Since we had gone to bed early, we rose early too. That suited me well - a long day lay ahead. After breakfast I said goodbye and continued south.

As I stepped back onto the street, I thought of the night before. Of the cold replaced by warmth. Of suspicion turned into openness. It gave me courage.

Montpellier

Once on the highway, hitchhiking became much easier. By evening I reached Montpellier. The difference in tempera-

ture was staggering. I had stepped out of winter and into spring. That same morning it had still been near freezing, but here a soft Mediterranean breeze brushed my face. Early December - and eighteen degrees.

The first thing I did was head downtown to see if I could play somewhere. The shops were closed, but there were enough people on the street. I picked a spot and began playing. Not long after, a few English guys passed by, instruments slung on their backs. We struck up a conversation. They had bought drinks at a night shop and told me they were going to a deserted house outside the city. If I wanted to come, no problem - I could sleep there too.

I grabbed my things and followed them. A few kilometers out, in the middle of a field, they had found a half-ruined villa, but with enough rooms to put a roof over your head. Thanks to the mild weather, no heating was needed. A bit of extra clothing for the cooler evenings was enough. Before long two more joined us. In the end, we were five.

Farewell Tour of Life

One of the boys who had taken me in was Alex. About my age, with a round, puffy face and lank, greasy hair. Short and stocky, wearing a green army coat stretched tight around his belly. He had made himself comfortable on a few cushions - a bottle of wine in one hand, a joint in the other.

He told me he had come here to die.

Drink had wrecked him so badly he didn't expect to reach thirty. His life had come to nothing. He had lost his grip on reality and spent years in a clinic. Once back on the street, things quickly unraveled again.

He had once dreamed of a career in music. He had played in several bands but never broken through. ‘

'That's the only thing I know,' he said. 'Making music.'

To make life a little more bearable, he had drifted south, drawn by the mild climate. There he played together with his friend Anthony in the towns along the coast. It felt like a farewell tour of life - a life he hoped would end sooner rather than later. That thought saddened me.

As I spent more days with Alex and heard him play, I realised he was an exceptional musician. One of the few I had ever met on the street with something truly special. His voice was warm and smoky, yet with an underlying strength that grabbed you by the throat. The moment he began sing, all attention was his. No pretence, no mask - everything was raw and real.

His guitar playing was as unique. With effortless fluency and flawless timing, he made melodic and harmonic variations dance along the neck.

There was a melancholy in it. Memories seemed to echo through that were too painful to speak aloud. Sometimes he closed his eyes and disappeared into a world we couldn't see. He wasn't playing to impress, but to let something go. The guitar was no longer an instrument, but an extension of his inner world. As if the music already carried the shadow of his farewell within it.

It made a deep impression, but it was short-lived. A few days later, he left with his mate for Antibes to try his luck there.

He was gone, and the weeks tightened towards Christmas. Meanwhile I met more street musicians. Through one of them, I found a new place to stay, closer to the centre than the villa, so I didn't have to walk so far each time.

Once again, an abandoned house, hidden in a narrow alley where crumbling houses, shoulder to shoulder, kept

one another upright. Sooner or later the wrecking ball would clear away this decayed glory. But not yet.

In the house he showed me, one room was completely clean. Carpet covered the floor, giving a little warmth and softness. That became my temporary home. At night I was there alone.

The Drifters' Camp

Anyone living on the street ends up under the bridge sooner or later.

In the middle of the shopping district, on a large square, ran a viaduct. Beneath it a camp had formed - tramps, the homeless, other survivors. Out in the open, yet sheltered; in the heart of the city, yet hidden from sight. A perfect base for those who earned their money on the street. Street musicians liked it too. Not to sleep - that was reserved for those who had found and claimed a spot. But for company, for the warmth of being together without masks. I often went there.

Somehow, I felt at ease. They were kind, without pretension, without hurry. Some still clung to dreams, for others it felt like their final stop. No one pretended to be anything other than who they were.

Florian, a German in his late twenties, was one of those for whom death would be a welcome guest. He drank about seven bottles of wine a day.

He was always wrapped in a bright green plastic jacket with pink stripes. Once it must have been a cheerful thing; now It was dulled and grimy with the dirt of the streets, the filth that seeps in and never lets go. When I saw him sitting there, running trembling fingers through his thin blond hair before taking another swallow, I felt pity.

Why? I kept asking myself. What drives someone to live

so destructively, so young? Like with Alex, I couldn't make sense of it.

Flo said that his father was also an alcoholic. A violent man who beat him as a child at the slightest provocation. Once it escalated so badly that he ended up in the hospital. His mother offered no protection either and was no better - she drank just as heavily.

Eventually he and his sister were taken away and placed in care. For a while, it seemed things might turn around. But then he started drinking too.

When I asked if he ever wanted to quit, or if he still hoped for another life, he shook his head.

'I'm done,' he whispered. 'I want only one thing: to get away from this unfriendly world as quickly as possible.'

We sat in loose sand, among scattered discarded concrete blocks. At the centre lay the firepit - the heart of the camp - where food was cooked by day and flames kept the night alive. Above us, traffic thundered across the viaduct, but the sound barely reached down here.

Everyone had their own sleeping place on the ground, arranged around the fire. The simplicity of existence, the unpretentious hospitality, and the 'we have nothing to lose' mentality gave me an unexpected inner peace.

No one demanded anything, except respect.

This was the heart of Montpellier's street life. Every day we gathered here again.

There also slept a Scottish boy, Charlie, who sometimes helped by passing around a cup while I played. He drank about as much as Flo. At first mostly beer, but that proved impractical - you always had to piss. So he switched to wine.

Still, he looked far healthier. The drink hadn't left its mark on him yet. With dark curls brushing his shoulders, brown eyes, and a face nearly perfectly proportioned, he

could have passed for a rock star. He didn't seem to realise it.

Charlie was modest, usually cheerful. You'd never guess he carried any weight inside - or else he was good at hiding it.

His constant companion was Steven, another Brit. Where Charlie stayed light, Steven carried a heaviness with him. They were inseparable, yet their energies couldn't have been further apart.

Steven didn't sleep under the viaduct; he had found an abandoned house. He played guitar and occasionally sold some hash. Back in England, he'd done time for dealing speed.

One time we were sitting on the street, Steven with his guitar on his lap, a carton of wine at his feet.

'Why speed, of all things?' I asked him. 'You know it destroys people.'

He shrugged.

'It just sells well. It brings in quick money. And if someone's going to do it anyway, I'd rather it be me than someone else.'

He spoke without regret, without guilt. What happened to others wasn't his concern. For him, money was all that mattered.

It worked for a while, until he got caught. Now he was here, claiming Sheffield held no future for him. Dealing was off the table, and with a record and no education, he saw no other way forward.

Music didn't seem to interest him. He played out of necessity. What he wanted was money.

'Big money,' he said, glancing up. 'Then I'll vanish.'

He didn't say where.

His words - especially his offhand manner - set me

thinking. I would have had major moral qualms; he clearly had none. That in itself was remarkable. It wasn't survival or side earnings he cared about - only the money. Right and wrong barely registered. Where I paused, he saw nothing but a heap of coins.

But thoughts like these didn't last long out here. The street gave you little time for moral reckonings; things unfolded as they would. Each carried his own way of surviving, his own invisible boundaries, and you learned not to meddle. What mattered was holding your own rhythm amid the unending current of events. To remain yourself while the days bled into one another, and to gather the fruit when it had ripened. For the street, too, had its seasons. And now, the gentlest of them was at hand.

Advent

The streets shimmered with lights and smelled of pine, and as Christmas drew closer, generosity seemed to hang in the air. Winter chilled the bones, but there was an unexpected warmth between people. Strangers who had passed me by for weeks suddenly noticed me - offering a coin, a nod, or a smile. With the thought of Christ's birth, they allowed themselves not only a feast, but also the joy of giving something small to their neighbour. For a moment, I belonged.

Old ladies who normally swerved around us now fumbled nervously with their purses, fishing out a few coins or even a bill, eyes twinkling as they pressed it into my hand. If I bowed and thanked them with a smile, they'd murmur something kind before vanishing back into the flow of the street.

This was *the* season to earn. My comrades and I worked

overtime. Evenings were best: the mood was looser, the spirit brighter - and with that, pockets opened more easily.

But beneath that fleeting joy lay the darker side of our existence.

Wailing Sirens

Werner was at the end. His liver was gone, and every day was agony. Only alcohol gave him relief. He usually begged outside a well-known hamburger chain on the square next to the viaduct, moving down the long line of people, asking each for a bit of change.

One afternoon he collapsed. He lay screaming on the pavement. People gasped, horrified - convinced he was dying right there. Someone called an ambulance. A siren wailed closer and closer. They carried Werner off, and we didn't see him again that night.

What stunned me was how little his mates reacted. Not the first time, they said. Some swore he staged it.

'At least that way he gets a clean bed and a hot meal,' someone muttered.

Everyone knew he didn't have long, and he tried in his own way to make something of it.

A few days later Werner reappeared. He looked almost renewed. But it faded quickly - soon he was back, stooped and shuffling through the streets, chasing coins.

Blankets

Then one morning the city dropped off boxes of blankets. It surprised me. The camp under the viaduct had long been a thorn in the side of the authorities, who had tried more than

once to clear it out by force. But they always returned. The hard line had failed - its ugliest result the winter before, when someone froze to death. Outcry followed, and this year the city chose a softer gesture: at least to keep them warm.

They were thick, army-issue wool blankets. The guys were thrilled.

The stage

And then there was Heinz - a gay man who once lit up Hamburg's clubs with his drag act. Until heroin stole it all: the work, the stage, most of his life.

He carried himself differently from the rest. Every gesture, every word, every tilt of his head echoed glamour and sorrow.

'*Liebling*,' he'd say, drawing out the vowel in mock elegance, '*you must always cover misery with glitter.*'

Heroin was behind him now. He got by on cheap wine and drugstore codeine - meant for colds, but for him, survival. One pill was nothing, ten made life bearable. Others did the same.

And sometimes, if he was in the right mood and we begged long enough, Heinz gave us a show. Then the place lit up. Draped in a blanket-dress, wielding a deodorant can like a microphone, eyes closed, he was transformed. To cheers and laughter, he gave himself away.

A song by Marlene Dietrich, with *Schwung* and dance steps still seared into his body from long ago. He didn't sing off-key, but neither was it pitch-perfect - it wasn't about perfection; it was about surrender.

The deeper he slipped into the part, the more trance-like he became. Head thrown back, arms wheeling, legs gliding

over the sand - as if he meant to drive every demon out of that cursed place.

Under the bridge, silence fell. All eyes fixed on him. He rose above the trash, above the fire, above the broken life that was crushing him. The forgotten diva - untoouchable in his fragility.

For a heartbeat he was who he once had been. Or who he was always meant to be.

And when his face finally broke into a smile, it was as if the sun itself had pierced the gloom and for one breath, misery was gone.

Poison

After closing time, the burger joint often dumped its unsold stock into the trash. The homeless raided it for whatever they could use. The company hated it. One day a rumor spread: poison had been sprinkled in the bins to scare them off.

The men knew what it meant, but didn't stop. They kept digging through the containers. Strangely, no one ever got sick. Was it real, or a scare tactic?

Either way - the leftover burgers stayed in high demand.

With a knife

There was one man nobody trusted: Brian, a South African. In the only conversation I had with him he admitted - without a trace of shame - that he went out at night to rob people with a knife. He first refused to say where he was from, claiming nobody knew, but his accent gave him away at once. I couldn't believe the others hadn't noticed.

He was small and wiry, with hollow cheeks and restless eyes that never stopped scanning. His dark hair was thin and uneven, clearly cut by himself. He carried a jittery tension, a permanent edge. The moment he walked into camp, voices dropped. People looked away. Shoulders shifted.

Begging, he told me, was a waste of time. One good strike brought in more than the rest could beg in a day.

'Isn't that what we all want?' he pressed. 'These people have plenty of money. They won't miss it. And I share what I get - so I look after them, too.'

It was true. He did hand out money. Not from kindness, but to buy silence. If they got a cut, they wouldn't turn him in. They took it - who didn't need cash? - but nobody liked it. It wasn't their way.

As we talked, he leaned in closer and closer, words spit into my face, his eyes lit with menace. I shoved him back in disgust. He was desperate to convince himself his logic held up, though he knew it didn't.

And behind it all, I saw fear. Not fear of the police, but fear of being exposed, betrayed, cast out. It gnawed at him, made him dangerous. He didn't belong, and he knew it.

So he shouted louder, claiming they owed him, that he kept the place running. They let him rant.

Life under the bridge had many faces - and, thankfully, only one Brian.

Hair in the soup

Another face was Thomas, a young Englishman, sharp, stylish, carrying himself with flair. He didn't talk much, but his look spoke for him: neat clothes, hair cut to perfection, straight from a London salon.

'Need a trim?' he asked one evening, giving Heinz a critical look.

Heinz flopped into a folding chair by the fire.

'Do it, *liebling*. But careful - got a sore spot on my crown. Banged my head this morning.' He pointed at it theatrically.

Smiling at his fussing, Thomas pulled a comb from his jacket, and went to work with quiet focus.

He was our barber. He'd trained for it. But in England he'd made his real living as a male prostitute. Here, too, he had his regulars - mostly older men. Sometimes he vanished for days, then showed up again as if nothing happened. For a haircut you could always turn to him.

What he forgot was the pot of soup simmering over the fire. Heinz's hair drifted from his shoulders straight into it. Thomas only noticed when he finished. Some of us had seen it, but kept quiet, grinning as we teased Heinz.

'That'll be a tasty dish, Heinz,' Charlie laughed.

Heinz played along. He scooped out the thickest clumps, winked, and said: 'Don't look - taste.'

To make it worse, he lifted the brew now and then like an offering.

'Anyone want some? It's divine today.'

Charlie shook his head, laughing.

'We know you're a great cook, Heinz, but this culinary masterpiece we'll skip for once.'

The rest roared in agreement.

Unbothered, Heinz ate every last spoonful. Then, wiping his mouth with flourish, he smirked: 'You don't know what you missed.'

Christmas dinner

On Christmas Eve the mission hosted a meal for the homeless. We all went - even Berndt, Flo's companion, tagged along. Berndt was a middle-aged German who mostly kept to Flo, and now and then Heinz. He hardly spoke to the rest of us, probably because he didn't know English - our shared tongue.

His face was puffy and purple from wine, the few strands of hair left hidden beneath a greasy, shiny little hat. No one knew how he got his money. I never saw him beg or hustle. Most likely, he had some arrangement with Flo, who would head out now and then to scrape together cash.

The only one from under the viaduct who stayed behind was Jack. A Dutchman from near Rotterdam, who had lived in Leeds for years and spoke with a thick Yorkshire accent. Nearly two metres tall, and always in need of his daily dose of heroin. I once tried to speak Dutch with him, but he brushed it off.

It felt odd - as though he'd turned his back not just on his country but on a piece of himself. After that, we hardly spoke.

The dinner the priests had so kindly prepared soon spiraled into a drunken beggars' carnival. At a long table they served us three courses. But during the main dish someone lobbed a spoonful across the room, and within minutes the place erupted. Every hit drew roars of laughter. Soon the table and floor were buried under scraps of food.

The priests didn't intervene. They carried on stoically, as if this were expected. The men treated them like servants - issuing orders, showing no hint of gratitude. When dessert arrived and they started smearing each other with cream and ice, I'd had enough.

'What a bunch of savages.'

I slipped out, disappointed, hoping I could shake off the scene with a bit of music. It only half worked. What gnawed at me was the humiliation of the priests. I felt ashamed for them - ashamed for all of us. They had seen it coming. They knew their pain better than anyone. Still, the ingratitude cut me deeply.

'Then don't go if you can't appreciate it,' I scolded myself.

Or was it something else? Did my companions want, for once, to issue commands and get away with it - like the wealthy do? Had they flipped the class system upside down for a night, to taste what it was like to be on top? Or was it nothing more than reckless mischief? I couldn't decide. All I knew was that treating people of goodwill this way went against every fiber of me.

A Thief

Later that night, when I returned, Jack was gone - taking with him anything that still held value.

The blessing of owning little is that you don't lose much. But what stung most was the betrayal.

The mood was heavy. Threats against Jack filled the air, though everyone knew he was gone for good.

Flo sat wordless by the fire, sliding his hand slowly through the flames.

'Look,' he said. 'It doesn't hurt. Fire isn't dangerous. It strokes you, warms you. Only if you linger too long, it burns.'

He raised his head, glanced around, and burst out laughing.

'I know!' he shouted. 'I know how it is! They're fooling us.'

We control fire. Our machines run on it. We've got everything under control. Nothing to fear!

He swigged from his bottle, stood, and marched toward his bedding, chanting louder and louder as he went: '*Everything under control! Everything under control! Everything... everything!*'

No one responded. The fire snapped softly, and I followed the curling orange threads with my eyes.

My thoughts drifted to my companions. Each was swallowed up in his own story. None of them was just a "*vagrant*"; each carried a past, a wound, a desire. I no longer saw them merely as people who slept under this bridge, but as mirrors of what stirred within me too: Struggle, fear, pain, the urge to escape, a longing for warmth.

I felt both tenderness and distance. As if I had one foot outside this life, yet still sat within their circle. Their existence was tragic, yet honest. They had nothing left to hide.

That was why I had stayed so long: their vulnerability stripped life of its masks, and in that nakedness a strange bond was born - a fleeting sense I'd always searched for, like a soft memory from childhood, brief yet timeless.

When I lifted my eyes to the dark sky above the viaduct, it felt like looking at a border. This chapter was closing. I would leave, but a part of them would remain in me forever.

To Southern Spain

It was getting colder. Time to chase the sun.

I passed my room on to a Scottish musician and his Basque girlfriend.

The day after Christmas I set off for southern Spain.

Outside the city a Spaniard picked me up - he had

driven the whole Route du Soleil and was headed for Barcelona.

'You got a licence?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Then take the wheel.'

He was weary from the long drive, but wanted to reach Barcelona that afternoon.

With a sprightly Golf GTI on the French toll roads, that was no problem.

I started the engine and pulled away.

He was asleep within minutes.

I drove straight through to Barcelona, then followed the coast south.

I stayed a few days in Alicante before moving on toward Granada.

HOLY MOUNTAIN

A PROMISE IS A PROMISE

New Year's Eve

I arrived in Granada on New Year's Day and found a modest little hotel. After earning well in Montpellier during Christmas, and with a bit left from Gerdt, I could treat myself: a hot shower, clean clothes, a fresh bed.

The stillness of my room clashed with the noise outside. By nightfall I stepped into the streets, hungry for life. The streets glowed in the warm orange light of lanterns and Christmas decorations. Music spilled from open windows, crowded bars, passing cars.

On Plaza de Bib-Rambla the crowd pressed in. Unfamiliar faces seemed like old friends. Young and old danced in the streets, shouting along with Spanish pop songs. Laughter, voices, and music swelled together. Everywhere people were drinking, toasting, kissing. Glasses raised, hands clasped, the air thick with smoke and firecrackers.

The mood was wild, yet safe - we were all friends for a single night.

Drinks came at me from all sides, and I rarely refused - a

mistake, in hindsight. Half a bottle of cava in my hand, I bumped into Jane. An English girl looking for adventure. We danced, laughed, ended up in each other's arms.

At midnight the city held its breath: twelve grapes, twelve chimes, fireworks exploding red and silver above us. Jane and I clung to each other as if we were reuniting after years - not as individuals, but as pure longing.

A new year, a new country, a new love. Anything seemed possible - yet the city had a harsh lesson waiting.

Robbery

When we'd had enough, we stumbled back to my hotel. I was drunk - she not much better. In the room I peeled off my clothes, collapsed onto the bed and was gone in seconds. Jane curled up beside me.

Morning hit like a hammer. Sunlight cut through the curtains; the room reeked of sweat and alcohol. The bed had half caved in, its frame lying on the floor, the ends sagging.

Jane sat up, rubbing her eyes, staring at me through a haze.

'What happened?' she whispered.

'No idea. The bed collapsed,' I muttered, unaware of what really had happened.

I climbed out and looked for my trousers. Gone. Inside, my mother had sewn a secret pocket with my money and passport. First disbelief, then panic. We tore through the room, checked under the bed, in the closet, even the hall.

Finally we found the trousers halfway down the stairs - empty. I sat on the sagging mattress, head in my hands. The hangover throbbed in my skull, but worse was the truth: no money, no papers, in a foreign city. Someone had slipped

into our room during the night and cleaned me out. Everything gone. Penniless. The hangover couldn't have been heavier. Jane and I stood stunned. What now?

As I stared at it, Jane sat down beside me, her hand warm on my shoulder. Not pity, but quiet solidarity.

'Come to my hotel,' she said. 'You can catch your breath there for a moment.'

We walked in silence, each lost in thought. In her small, plain room she made tea, straightened the blankets, handed me a towel.

I went to the police the next day, but it got me nowhere. On the other hand, I had to be honest: it was also my own stupid fault. Drunk, a stranger, in a foreign city - I'd made myself an easy target. But this thief had gone further: he'd followed us into the room and struck while we slept.

With Jane

The blow was heavy, but I landed softly - in Jane's arms. Caring, warm, with a unforced sympathy. Her lilting English made everything sound lighter than it was. My head cleared. The future took on colour again, hope flickered on the horizon. She became my guide.

There was no rush. We read, talked, drifted in and out of sleep. We stayed in bed, let the sun tease us awake, breakfasted on rolls and oranges. Sometimes we stayed there all day, lost in thought until a stray remark set us laughing again. Now and then I picked up my guitar and she sang with me.

Nights we wandered the city, shared tapas at tiny tables, drank wine or beer, watched life pass in the streets. Then we returned, a little tipsy, curling into each other's warmth. The nights were tender, without big words, without promises.

We both knew it couldn't last. But while it did, it was enough. No more travellers, no more victims, no more plans. Two bodies in a room, where time - for a moment - looked the other way.

The Caves of Sacromonte

When Jane returned to England, our romance came to an abrupt end. The brief life we had shared vanished overnight. Her scent lingered on my clothes, her voice echoed in my mind, but her warmth was gone. What remained was the stark truth: I had to fend for myself again. Without papers, without her, I was exposed; a single police cheque could see me thrown out of the country. In that uncertainty, her words about the caves of Sacromonte came back to me. She had told me about them as a vague set of directions toward a new beginning.

I set out to find them, climbing higher and higher as the streets narrowed into a labyrinth. Tight alleys, sometimes not even a metre wide, left me disoriented. I asked directions more than once. At last the cobblestones ended, giving way to sandy tracks. From a ridge I looked out over the city. To the left, the pristine white of the Sierra Nevada blazed against a cloudless sky.

There they were: dozens of caves carved into the hillside. From the outside they looked like dark wounds in a pale skin. Many had collapsed or been choked with rubble. Stray dogs haunted the ruins - skinny, matted, tick-bitten, skittish and silent. I combed the slope for a cave that was sound and sheltered, and soon found one: three rooms, a concrete floor. The doorways braced with brick arches, the ceiling set with pebbles held fast in lime.

No water, no electricity, no toilet. But it didn't matter.

Life here was free. At night the earth gave off its scent, and every sound carried across the hills.

Below lay the gypsy district of Sacromonte, with its whitewashed dwarf houses, caves, winding alleys and small squares with fountains. That was where I filled my bottles and jerrycans, holding a hose to the trickling public spouts. The flow was slow, but time was abundant.

Inside, I built a hearth. An old chimney shaft pierced the ceiling. With stones, an upturned oil drum and a bottomless pan, I rigged a contraption to cook and keep warm.

At the entrance hung only a curtain, no door. But that didn't matter. This was home now.

Street Music in Zacatín

The cave gave me rest, but no food. So almost every day I descended into the city to play music on the street. Everything had to come with me - if I left something behind, it was usually gone or ruined by the time I returned, often at the hands of kids from the neighborhood. Luckily I travelled light: my guitar and a backpack with a few things - that was all.

The walk down was about two kilometers, leading me through old neighborhoods where the Moorish influences of five centuries ago were still palpable. White walls, wrought-iron balconies, tiled panels and fragrant courtyards. The closer I came to the centre, the busier it grew. Teahouses, bazaars, grocers and shops bursting with trinkets, carpets and North African pottery crowded into ever busier streets.

In the morning, the air was still cool and quiet - shopkeepers opened their shutters, brooms brushed the

doorstep, and the scent of coffee mingled with the morning light.

I usually played in Calle Zacatín, a narrow shopping street that led onto Plaza de Bib-Rambla. It was always busy: shoppers, tourists carrying bags full of souvenirs, beggars with dogs, street musicians. Shop windows filled with leather and textiles. Dresses, coats, and scarves hung close together; fabrics in deep colors, racks spilling out onto the pavement. From open shops came voices, music, the clinking of coins.

The Zacatín felt intimate. Everything came at you at once: glances, sounds, smells. Yet within that bustle there was also a rhythm, a cadence that carried you along - like the heartbeat of the city. My music blended into the street: the click of women's heels on the tiles, vendors calling out from side streets, the jingle of a doorbell as someone stepped into a shop.

At midday it grew quieter. The siesta hung like a veil over the streets. Less attention, less contact. The city seemed turned inward, languid and mute. Everyone, myself included, was on pause. Until the shops reopened, voices rose again, and Granada showed its lively face once more.

After closing time the city changed again. Quieter, lanterns giving off a golden glow. Now and then a group passed, or a solitary walker. The rush of the day was gone; space opened - on the streets and in my head. My playing slowed, became more melancholy, more intimate in the nearly empty street with its beautiful acoustics. That's when I enjoyed it most.

In that relaxed atmosphere, unexpected musical moments sometimes arose. One evening Jonas appeared, a saxophonist from Austria, asking if he could join me.

It became a session that filled the street with warm,

smoky tones; my guitar laid down rhythmic waves, his sax carved long arcs above, sharp then languid. Passersby stopped, swayed softly, or let their feet unconsciously follow the rhythm.

Jonas played with closed eyes, his shoulders swaying, the brass glinting in the twilight. Now and then he threw me a glance, a nod, a secret only we understood. We had known each other's music for barely five minutes, but the notes met like old friends.

When we finished, the street stayed silent for a moment. Some smiled, others stood motionless, afraid to break the spell. A modest applause fell upon us. Jonas looked at me with a short, conspiratorial smile. Without words we counted in and began another set.

As the last notes faded, we finally felt the cold. Our fingers stiff, the street nearly empty. We were thirsty, craving something stronger than water. I suggested we go to *El Tornillo* - a bar you had to know to find. Jonas shrugged and smiled.

'You lead,' he said, slipping his sax back into its case.

El Tornillo

Jonas's eyes widened the moment we stepped inside. He was clearly no man of the street; everything in this bar belonged to a world he only knew from stories. It was a refuge - a frayed crossroads of lost souls, free spirits, street musicians, hippies, and wandering travellers.

On the façade a large metal screw had been painted - crooked, set apart from everything else. Look closer, and it wasn't a logo but a quiet wink. Only those who were missing a screw found their place here.

The door creaked open as if giving doubters one last

chance to turn back. Inside hung a stale scent of tobacco, hash, and unwashed clothes - the familiar smell of those without a home.

At night, when the shops closed and the day's work of street people was done, the place filled up. It was warm, dark, and overflowing with stories. The little money they had scraped together was effortlessly transformed into drink and camaraderie. From the speakers blared hippie music of the sixties and seventies, interspersed with the same stack of flamenco records.

The bartender - a silent man with short grey hair - poured out trust rather than liquor, giving the outcasts under his roof a sense of arrival.

Spanish filled the air, mixed with French, German, and English. The bar pulsed with its own rhythm, born of music, gestures, and glances - and of the shared awareness of belonging nowhere. Except here.

We found a bit of space at the bar. Jonas let his eyes wander, from graffiti-scribbled walls to chairs ready to collapse at any moment. He sipped slowly at his glass, listening to the cacophony of voices, accents, and music washing over each other in waves. There was something in his smile that said: *I don't see this every day.*

Later that evening Jonas set down his glass and pulled on his coat.

'Málaga is waiting,' he said with a crooked grin. 'Tomorrow at seven, the bus.'

'And you?' he said. 'You're staying here a bit longer to make music.'

We slapped each other on the shoulder with the ease of old friends.

At the door he turned once more.

'Always carry your instrument,' he called, his words half drowned in the noise. 'You never know what might happen.'

I laughed, gave him a thumbs up, and watched him vanish into the night. Voices and music blended into a soft haze, glasses clinked, someone burst out laughing. Across the room my eyes caught hers - small, dark-haired, a calm presence amid the noise. It lasted no more than a moment, but it was enough to remember her. And so, in the soft light of El Tornillo, I met Reme.

Reme

I had seen her before. She usually sat on a stoop in the old city, playing the flute or holding out her hand. Small in stature, jet-black hair, a narrow pointed face, and eyes so dark they seemed to draw you in. Most of the time she wore black Turkish trousers and brightly coloured tops - sweaters, cardigans, layer upon layer. Many took her for a gypsy. She looked the part.

Her voice was soft, her movements calm: modest and well-liked among the street crowd. She never pushed herself forward; something in her put you at ease without trying.

Not showy, yet she stayed with you. Not for what she did, but for what she left unsaid. She moved like someone used to being unseen - and in that, became visible.

We started talking. Or rather: we exchanged a few words, listened to the music, smiled. She spoke only Spanish, and I barely did. Still, we understood each other. Our first conversations were gestures, stray remarks, tentative jokes. Sometimes she would look at me and shake her head lightly, smiling in a way that said more than any sentence could.

In the weeks that followed, we sought each other out

more often. We walked through the city, sat on walls, shared drinks, smoked together. Something grew - slowly, without urgency. As if it had been there all along, and we were only catching up.

One afternoon, sitting on the steps behind the market, I asked if she wanted to come up. To my cave. She simply nodded.

At first she stayed a night now and then. As friends. She would go again. Then return. After a while she left her things behind. One day I noticed myself waiting when she wasn't there. And another day, she still was - without words having been spoken. She lived with me - without announcement, without agreement.

Because she spoke only Spanish, I was forced to learn. I picked it up faster than expected. Many words I recognised from English, and because we were together every day, we developed a language of our own - half Spanish, half gesture, the rest intuition. She was patient, laughed at my stumbles, corrected me without saying a word.

Living in a cave without amenities was different for a woman than for a man, but Reme managed effortlessly. She never complained.

We shared what we earned on the street and collected vegetables at the end of the market that would otherwise be thrown away. Reme knew everyone and often got more than we could carry. The climb back up was heavy, but it was part of our life. With enough supplies, we sometimes stayed above for days.

Slowly the cave became our home. In habits and rhythm. In calm. In the trust that she would stay.

Inside it was bare, but peaceful. We sat on cushions on the smooth concrete floor. In one of the rooms lay a double mattress I had once hauled up. With enough blankets we

kept warm, even on cold nights. Sometimes I felt her toes against my shin, a reminder that winter still ruled outside.

In the evenings, when darkness fell, we lit the fire. A few twigs, dry grass, a bit of resin - enough to make the flames dance. She usually sat between my legs, my chest her backrest, my legs her armrests.

Together we stared into the fire, the way others stare at a screen. The flames cast shadows across our faces and the ceiling. Pressed close, time seemed to disappear. We spoke little, but read each other in gestures, glances, a touch, a sigh, a head on a shoulder. Now and then a whisper in Spanish or English - without explanation. Understanding came of itself.

The cave felt like a safe cocoon, cut off from all that was compulsory, hurried, or loud. The outside world was switched off. Here only the now mattered. The fire. Her closeness. The space between the two of us.

Charlotte and Jose

It was through Reme that I found myself in a circle of people who had long gravitated around her - among them Charlotte and her Spanish boyfriend, Jose. Charlotte was a French girl who, like Reme, lived on the streets. She would sometimes appear with Jose and their little dog, Potiron.

Charlotte was restless by nature: always in motion, talking with sweeping gestures and a voice that cracked and rose, the complete opposite of Reme's calm.

Jose was a lanky guy with a perpetual hat on his head. He seemed elsewhere most of the time. I could never read him. He spoke little, observed much, but without connecting.

Charlotte usually sat cross-legged on the pavement,

Potiron in her lap, begging with a theatrical bravado. Like Reme, Jose played the flute. Neither of them was particularly musical, but that hardly mattered. People mostly gave out of compassion, or simply because they had been greeted with warmth.

It was likely no different with me, though at times passers-by stopped to truly listen. I could hardly bear it - the way they stood there in silence, expectant. I knew I should be grateful for their attention, yet I was too shy. So I often closed my eyes, retreating into my own world, where I needed to meet no one's gaze. That helped.

Kenny

Everything shifted when I played with someone else. With Jonas, Finn, Nils - and others. My shyness dissolved in the shared act of making music. The attention no longer weighed on me alone; it was spread, the energy circling between us. I felt lighter, unburdened, as though judgment itself had loosened its grip.

That's how Kenny came into the picture - an Englishman, a few years older, loose-limbed, with mischief flickering in his eyes. He too played guitar, and carried himself with an easy playfulness that made it seem anything might happen at any moment.

He liked to talk about the time he'd played in a band that had a modest hit back in England - always with equal parts pride and self-mockery. When he and I performed together, it was never music; it turned into a show: silly dance steps, improvised harmonies, little riffs thrown at each other like challenges.

Nothing was planned, it simply happened. Sometimes we burst out laughing right in the middle of a song, even

when it collapsed in chaos. It didn't matter. On the street, you played with whatever came your way.

The sounds bounced between the buildings, children spun around us, tourists paused for a photo. Applause might come, or a voice might float down from an open window. The street became our stage, and the rules were ours to invent.

But Kenny, like so many Englishmen, refused to learn even a word of Spanish. He believed English should be enough for everyone. If he wanted to light a cigarette and we lacked a lighter, he would make a theatrical effort to get fire in English. He'd call out slowly and loudly to passers-by: 'Do you have light?' - pointing insistently at his cigarette tip.

After seeing him flounder like that a few times, I said, 'Why not say *tienes fuego*?' How hard can it be?'

Of course, it wasn't hard at all - and those became his first words in Spanish.

Kenny lived with his girlfriend, Claire. She taught English, paid the rent. Kenny treated her like his mother, expecting her to do everything - cook, clean, shop. He himself preferred to stay in bed all day, waiting for comfort to arrive. Claire sometimes complained about his laziness, but never pressed the matter. It was as if she found some strange peace in his slow, untroubled way of drifting through life.

WIn such encounters, I noticed that I found it easier to connect with Northern Europeans than with Spaniards. There was a natural understanding, a familiar set of unspoken rules, the kind I had grown up with. With Southern Europeans it was different. Their social codes, their intensity, their spontaneity - I found them hard to read. The language barrier only added to that.

That's why I usually kept somewhat to myself in Spanish company. They sometimes called me "*un hombre reservado*."

But music always cut through that reserve. There was one Spaniard with whom I felt immediately at ease. His name was Flavio - an accordionist of rare brilliance.

Flavio

He had learned his craft as a child, travelling with circuses across Spain. Years of accordion playing had moulded his body-broad shoulders and a small upper-back hunch that left him leaning forward as he walked. His repertoire seemed endless, and he played with a fluidity and passion that struck me to the core.

The music that rose from Flavio's accordion felt as if it came from elsewhere - not the instrument, but a hidden well of pain, tenderness, and longing. His playing was never smooth, never polished; it carried both rough edges and sudden grace. A crooked note, a trembling beat, an unexpected surge - always human, always alive.

His melodies drifted slowly through the street like smoke seeping through cracks. They touched walls and balconies, floated on the murmur of the crowd. With ease, they filled the Zácatín and touched hearts before anyone realized they were listening.

Everyone knew him. Even the locals, hardened to the endless street music of Granada, carried a quiet fondness for him.

In company he was uneasy, awkward almost - head bent, a shy smile, darting eyes. But when he played, all that fell away. His shoulders loosened, his back bent and swayed with the instrument, and suddenly he was inhabited by something larger than himself.

Now and then we played together. Often the blues - his long, meandering solos unfolding while I strummed and sang. Something would break open then: the notes did not push their way out, *they escaped*, as if freed. And everyone felt it.

At night he wandered through the cafés. A handful of songs, the hat passed around. I went with him sometimes. Watching him turn an entire bar into a single listening body was like stepping into another world. The first notes came soft, searching, like footsteps in fresh snow. Then, little by little, the sound claimed the room. You could feel the music creeping through the floorboards, over tables and glasses, into the bodies of those who listened. Conversations faltered, faces softened. The music was never cheerful. It carried sorrow, but it healed.

When the last chord faded, the silence clung to the air; as if the room itself had to recover from his absence. And he - he would bow his head, half-apologetic for what he had unleashed.

Flavio was the finest musician on the street. His melodies always carried a flaw, a sigh, a trace - something that stayed with you. Warm, imperfect, yet piercingly true. He knew hundreds of tunes - folk songs, flamenco, tango, blues - and yet he bent each one to his own melancholy, so that his accordion did not make music, but spilled memories. He could have been a professional, if life had been kinder.

Yet there was also the other side of Flavio. One eye, grotesquely swollen, seemed ready to fall from its socket. His solitude, his clumsy attempts at daily life. He lived inside himself, except when music let him out. Free drinks, endless nights, wrong turns. First the bottle, later heroin.

His suffering showed in everything: in the shy turn of his

head after a song, in the awkward retreat from applause, in the way his presence seemed apologetic.

Over time, I saw him less and less, until one day he had completely disappeared.

Later I heard that his eye had finally burst. The news struck like cold water, though I had long known he was balancing on that edge. I still saw him there, in the Zacatín, hunched gently over his instrument, the music wrapping him like armor. The thought that the sound was gone left the streets emptier than I had ever known.

I missed him - as a musician, but above all as a presence. His accordion had given Granada a voice no one else could. In him, beauty and suffering were inseparable, and with that alone he filled the streets.

His absence felt like the final chord of a symphony of suffering.

The streets of Granada never stood still. Empty spaces were always filled again. Sometimes by something big, sometimes by something small.

Thus appeared Guiri, the little cat who suddenly entered my life.

Guiri and Fango

Life left its traces even among the ruins and abandoned houses in the city: hidden nests of stray dogs and cats, tucked away in forgotten corners.

One day, Reme was handed a puppy - a scruffy street-born mutt with oversized paws and startled eyes. She named him Fango, and overnight, our cave became a home for three.

At first, he slept in our bed. I wasn't thrilled. Who knew

what parasites he carried: fleas, ticks, worse. But Reme, raised on a farm, saw him differently - to her, animals were like children. This puppy was no exception. Eventually, I managed to convince her: Fango would sleep on a blanket beside the bed.

Soon after, a fellow street musician gave me a kitten he had found, abandoned and motherless. It was barely two weeks old, fragile, its tiny body wrapped in a red-and-white coat. I fell for it instantly.

Reme found a way to keep it alive: she dipped bread in warm milk, letting the little one suck. To our relief, it worked.

I called him Guiri - a Spanish slur for Northern European tourists. His rusty fur seemed to match. At first, Reme wasn't exactly enthusiastic. To her, each call sounded like a curse. For me, it was playful, a private joke with the Spaniards.

When I walked down to the city, I carried Guiri in the inside pocket of my jacket. He loved it. But whenever I played the guitar, he would lie close to the soundboard. At first I thought the vibrations, the resonance, the noise would make him restless. But he seemed to enjoy it. Every time I looked at him, he was sleeping peacefully.

As Guiri grew older, he no longer needed milk. But special food was out of the question - for him and for Fango. They ate what we ate: vegetables, potatoes, scraps of bread, whatever was left of the soup. Rarely meat. No tins, no kibble.

They adjusted, hunger teaching them flexibility. Even peels and raw greens disappeared into their stomachs. But the day we brought home a bag of small fish from a generous market seller, Guiri lost himself. He devoured

them in one gulp, his belly swelling so much he waddled like a drunk, leaning against Fango for balance before collapsing into a blissful sleep.

We laughed until our stomachs hurt. That scene etched itself into my memory: a bloated kitten asleep against a dog, in a place where nothing came without struggle.

By then, Fango and Guiri had woven themselves into our lives. With two animals inside, the cave felt more alive than ever. Outside, too, the settlement of cave dwellers was quickly growing.

Cave dwellers

Bit by bit, the hill grew busier. At first I was almost alone, but soon the signs of life multiplied: tattered cloths at the entrances, smoke curling into the evening air, voices carrying with the morning light. The caves were filling up.

Along our path came Thanos and Yannis, two Greek musicians. Thanos played mandolin and guitar, Yannis the drum. They wore their dreadlocks like banners of freedom and smoked hash with abandon - forbidden back home in Greece, but here in Spain, they felt free.

They claimed a fine spot near an old stone bridge on the edge of town. Sometimes I joined them there. We played for the fun of it, never for riches. By the time the coins were split three ways, little remained. Solid friends, easy company, no drama.

Across the hill lived an older Moroccan. He had been around before me, keeping mostly to himself. I never asked how he survived. Now and then I'd see him in a bar in town; we'd nod or trade a few words. He didn't belong to our little circle.

Opposite our cave, across a small valley, a young German studied flamenco guitar. With a teacher from Sacromonte guiding him, he practised from dawn till dusk. His notes rolled through the hills as if he were playing at our doorstep. It never annoyed me; it was a gift.

Two hills away lived a Dutchman and a Belgian, sharing a cave. Our worlds hardly touched. Theirs ran on another beat: loud, reckless, soaked in liquor. And worse - heroin. That was a frontier we refused to cross.

They were fugitives from their own countries, like so many from the north, hoping to burn away their guilt under the southern sun. But that illusion of freedom often turned into another prison - no bars, only heavier chains: addiction, despair, estrangement.

One day the Belgian went back home, choosing to surrender.

'The life I'm living here,' he said, 'is worse than what waits for me there.'

There was also Claus, a young German. A pleasant fellow. For him, street life never cut deep; it was more a holiday adventure. Living in a cave was another story to tell. After a month, he moved on. His cave was soon claimed by Spaniards.

Life on the Mountain

Everything we needed, we carried uphill: water, wood, food, clean laundry. Warmth came only from the fire we lit ourselves. Even water was never guaranteed; the fountains in Sacromonte sometimes ran dry, and the outside tap at the monastery higher up was no certain refuge. Comfort here was not a given, but a reward for devotion.

There was something in return.

The same mountain that asked so much of us, gave back as much: the morning light slowly creeping over the hill. The view. The silence. The city below felt far away. Up here there were no cars, no shouting, no hurry. Only the rustle of a lizard, the song of birds, the sound of a guitar string.

During the day the warmth was gentle. We would sit in front of the cave, letting the sun fall on our faces, waking us to life again and again. But when the sky turned blue-grey and the cold came creeping, we lit the fire.

We lived at about 900 metres altitude. In the mornings, a thin frost often covered the hills. The stones were cold under your feet, the air sharp as glass. It bit into your face as soon as you stepped outside.

But when the sun climbed higher and the cold receded from the slopes, the sound of guitars drifted up from the quarter below. The gypsies often played outdoors, in the open air. At first It was something you heard - later It was something you felt. The music seeped into your system until it lived inside you.

In time, flamenco became a natural part of mountain life. The world around you took on another colour, another weight. We lived among a people with their own language of sounds and rhythms, a culture rooted in pain, pride, and inheritance. A culture we would never truly understand - but one we quietly admired.

With the people of Sacromonte themselves, we had hardly any contact. There was distance, more on their side than on ours. Perhaps out of pride, perhaps out of caution. But their music - it could not be held back. It crossed the gap between their world and ours with ease.

And yet other things made the gap clear. Daily life here left its marks on bodies and clothes, as inevitable as the

music floating through the neighbourhood.. Hygiene was a daily struggle. You had to fight for it. Often you could tell right away who lived in a cave: clothes turned grey from long wear, hair tangled by dust and wind.

As pure and rich as life sometimes felt, it also ate away at you. At your body, your mind, your ties with the city, with each other. Slowly another feeling crept in: a longing for space, for change. Toward the end of winter Reme and I decided to take a 'holiday': to the sea, to be completely clean and fresh again, to take distance and escape the daily grind. Not far, not luxurious; simply somewhere else, sea instead of stone, sand instead of dust.

But first we had to secure the cave. We didn't want anyone to move in while we were gone, so we decided to build a door.

A Door

Johannes - a German who didn't live in the caves but often dropped by for a chat - had an idea. He worked in construction, had been in Spain for years, and knew the ropes.

'We'll get a gate with a door from a scrapyard and put it in front of the entrance,' he said.

'How? We don't have transport,' I replied.

'No worries,' was all he said.

We set a day and took the bus to the edge of town. There the landscape turned into a jumble of garages, workshops, and scrapyards. Everything lay open to the street, doors wide, spilling sound and smell into the air. You just walked straight in.

Johannes went into a scrapyard, poked around, and found an iron gate with a door.

'Perfect,' he said.

He haggled with the owner and insisted on paying no more than scrap price. The deal was done. Moments later we were walking off with the gate on our shoulders.

But we still needed hooks welded on. We had already picked up cables and pins at the scrapyard - enough to fasten the gate to the rock face. The hooks were missing.

'But we don't have a welder,' I said.

'Ask,' Johannes answered, giving me a sideways look.

We wandered on until we came to a metal workshop. Inside, someone was welding. Johannes stepped up, explained what we needed, and asked if he could help. The man nodded, lowered his visor, and went to work.

When I asked what it cost, he said: 'Nothing.'

Now we only needed transport.

'We'll hitchhike,' said Johannes.

I had my doubts. Who would pick up two guys carrying a heavy iron gate? But I kept my mouth shut. Johannes seemed to have an answer for everything.

Eventually a Hanomag with an open flatbed pulled over. The driver agreed to take us if we paid a little for expenses. No problem. He dropped us in Sacromonte.

We hauled the gate up the hill. Johannes helped attach it. With cables, hooks, and a solid lock, we fixed it to the rock.

With a door and a lock, we finally had a real home.

On holiday

Someone had told us about the abandoned village of San Pedro, on the southeastern coast, near the little town of Las Negras. There was said to be a small beach, a freshwater spring, some ruins - a paradise-like hideout, reachable only by a mountain path. Exactly what we were looking for.

We stocked up on dry food: beans, lentils, rice. Enough to last a while. Fango and Guiri had to come too. The dog and cat were inseparable by now: best friends, always together, even curled up in the same heap to sleep.

We planned to take the bus to Almería, but pets weren't allowed. Luckily they were still small. Reme had found a large bag big enough for Fango, and she would carry him. Guiri, as usual, disappeared into the inside pocket of my jacket.

As long as he stayed quiet. One bark and it would be over. But he kept still; he seemed to know it was serious. We breathed easier when we arrived in Almería that evening without a hitch.

The Second Coming of Christ

It was too late to travel any further, so we decided to head into town. I could play some music somewhere. But unlike Granada, the streets here were deserted at night, lying silent and empty.

We met a few others who also lived on the streets. They confirmed what we already suspected: after a certain hour, nothing much happened.

One of them, an older man with a small backpack, walked with us for a while. His grey hair brushed his shoulders, moving with every step. On his chin grew a pointed beard, which he occasionally tugged at softly - as if to keep his thoughts in order.

He was lively, restless, almost bouncing rather than walking. He spoke with infectious energy and immediately showed affection for our animals. Especially Guiri, who struggled to keep up, he would carefully guide back to us each time.

When we sat down somewhere, he remained standing. He looked at us for a moment, twisted a lock of hair around his finger, and began speak. Not small talk, not fragments, but a real address.

He said he was a messenger of God and quoted Bible verses, parts of which I only half understood. His words were about Paul, about the times we lived in, about the approaching return of Christ.

Not literal, he said - not on a cloud. The return would not be in flesh and blood, but in spirit. In consciousness. In love

According to him, the world was wrapped in darkness - a spiritual night. Moral awareness had eroded; people addicted to power and possessions, cut off from any higher truth. Even the stars in the sky had faded and could no longer guide lost humanity.

But even the deepest darkness, he said, could not extinguish the light. It could be covered, dimmed, pushed out of sight - but never destroyed. Sooner or later it would reveal itself again. According to him, love and wisdom would return as an inner transformation, a growing clarity of awareness that begins the moment a person dares to let go and open up to something greater than their daily struggle.

He called that the return of Christ. Not a cosmic spectacle, not a figure descending from the sky, but a quiet awakening from within. A new kind of consciousness that slowly lights up in the soul, that rises above old fear and confusion, and connects a person with love, wisdom, and direction. Whoever truly dared to open themselves, he said, would witness Christ being born again - within themselves. That was the return.

At first he was one of those wandering figures you sometimes meet on the street. But there was structure in his

words. He spoke clearly and passionately, with conviction. He truly believed what he said - and you could feel it.

Jesus would not return in a spectacle in the sky, as many expected, but in the stillness of the heart. In the person who opened himself to eternal love. What he said, in fact, made perfect sense.

He stayed with us a little longer. Reme spoke with him, while I played a few songs. He listened intently, glanced at our animals - lying peacefully together - and smiled.

When he rose, he looked up at the starless night and said: 'Wait patiently for the morning. He will come. *A promise is a promise.*'

I did not yet know that these words would return to me later, in another form, from another mouth. As if the same message had to reach me twice, in two different ways.

Abandoned House

It was time to find a place to sleep. In a strange city, it always carried some risk. You never knew who or what you might run into - or which neighbourhoods to avoid. But the longer you lived on the street, the sharper your instincts became. A quiet vigilance. Antennas tuned to every signal.

We searched for an abandoned house - sleeping inside was always safer than outside. Fango and Guiri followed without a leash. Fango stayed close, obedient as ever. Guiri was another matter. He darted off in all directions, forcing us to stop until he reappeared. We hoped he would learn, though we doubted it.

Eventually we found a ruined house. Most of it had collapsed, only one room still standing. The roof sagged, upper floors had caved in. My flashlight slid across clay walls, cracked and torn, jagged pieces jutting out danger-

ously. Rubbish everywhere. The floor rotten planks and broken beams. We hesitated. It was wiser to move on. But fatigue won.

We cleared a corner. Outside I scavenged for cardboard - boxes left by shopkeepers on the kerb. After some searching I found a few decent pieces. We laid them down, and spread out our sleeping bags.

Even in sleep you stayed alert. To rats. To animals. To voices. To footsteps. To the stranger who might suddenly appear in the doorway.

Sleeping on the street was never real sleep. Only waiting until it got light again.

Animal Show

The next morning Reme went out to find some breakfast. By midday we were looking for a good spot to play, hoping to earn a bit more money - with Fango and Guiri trotting along behind us. This time, we really had to pay attention.

We had barely entered the shopping streets of Almería when Guiri disappeared again. No leash, no plan. Just a little red tomcat with the confidence of a street magician. Fango followed faithfully, sniffing, plodding along. But Guiri - Guiri was everywhere and nowhere.

He darted under racks, between legs, leapt against shop windows, fascinated by whatever lay inside. Then vanished, until a shriek rose from some shop. The tone unmistakable: excited, breathless, full of delight.

'Ay, qué gato más mono!'

And sure enough - there was Guiri, on the counter of a perfume shop, tail straight up, head cocked, basking in the attention. Staff chased him, customers laughed, someone

took a picture. Guiri held court. Chaos and charm in perfect balance.

Before we could catch him, he was gone again - a souvenir shop, under a café chair, into a clothing store. His own tour of the city.

We followed, half ashamed, half proud. Everywhere he went, something happened: a smile, a small commotion, a moment of surprise. Children pointed and bent to pet him, old women called things I couldn't understand.

Fango watched calmly, occasionally giving a soft bark as if to call him back - useless, of course. Guiri came back eventually, entirely according to his plan.

After our chaotic walk, we finally found a location along an old city wall - no shops nearby, but plenty of passers-by - perfect. In the shopping streets you could be chased away at any moment, especially if the staff decided you were scaring off customers.

In Granada, I therefore often played in the evenings, after closing time. But even then you had to time it right - too late and the neighbours complained. Without a passport I couldn't afford trouble.

At the corner by the old fortress wall, just beyond the busiest stretch of shops, we laid out our cloth. I had my guitar ready, prepared to play, but it quickly became clear that today my music wouldn't be what drew people in.

Fango dozed in the sun, lazy and serene as always - until Guiri launched himself onto him. Out of nowhere, in a graceful arc, paws spread like a tiny hunting beast. Fango didn't stir. He rolled onto his side, let out a low, gentle growl, and nudged Guiri away in play. Guiri flipped backward, rolled, and sprang right back at him. They were playing - truly playing.

People began to stop. Tentatively at first, then in growing

numbers. A young woman pointed and laughed. Children stared in awe. Guiri bounded over Fango, darted under his belly, and burst into wild sideways hops. Fango snapped at the air near his ear, then draped a loving paw over him. They turned, reset, and started again. They moved like a choreographed duet - playful, touching, full of trust, affection, and cheekiness.

Tourists reached for their cameras, leaned in, and snapped photos and videos - convinced they'd stumbled onto something rare. A German tourist set down his backpack, crouched, and began shooting an entire series, capturing moment after moment. People around us whispered and smiled. Some tossed coins into the guitar case I had laid out - not for my music, but for them.

I didn't need to sing. The show was already underway. Two souls, dog and cat, celebrating life in a language everyone understood. And for a brief moment, the pavement wasn't a pavement anymore, but a small theatre, with the sun as the spotlight and the city as its audience.

And us? We sat and watched, astonished by the attention. It was the first time we had taken them both along - and already a roaring success.

By evening we packed up. The sun hung low and warm, and the guitar case held more than enough for the bus - all thanks to Fango and Guiri. Smiling at their unexpected talent, we walked to the station.

But disappointment awaited: the last bus had already gone. Another night in Almería. We had no desire to return to the abandoned house. Reme suggested something else: the beach, under the open sky. Or, as she called it, *the hotel with a thousand stars*.

The Orion

On the way we passed a neighbourhood under construction, not far from the beach. Rows of half-built houses stood abandoned, the safety fences partly torn down - easy enough to slip through. Inside everything had been stripped: kitchens ripped out, window frames torn from the walls, skylights gone. As if a swarm of ants had hollowed out the carcass.

I looked around, astonished.

'Did people here have so little respect for someone else's property?' I wondered.

It wasn't moral outrage - more a disbelief that stuck with me.

On the beach we stumbled upon a massive concrete colossus, rising dozens of metres high. From its belly stretched a metal skeleton, supported by iron pillars, like a rusty pier reaching a hundred metres into the sea. Once this structure had been a symbol of progress - now, abandoned and weathered, it dominated the horizon, a mute witness to dreams long gone.

Against the damp, cold underbelly of the concrete giant we set up camp. At last we could take the long-awaited plunge into the sea. The water was icy, salty, but liberating. We washed ourselves from head to toe, rinsing away weeks of sweat, street dust, and city grime.

When darkness fell, we curled into our sleeping bags and looked upward. The sky lay open. We watched Orion slowly sink at the western edge of the firmament - a silent sign that winter was drawing to a close. Later the clouds gathered, and a fine drizzle fell. For a moment we feared the worst, but it stopped there. The night remained calm.

A red glow in the east announced a new day. We woke to

the soft murmur of the sea and the slow groan of the concrete colossus above us. Salt still clung to our skin, but it felt clean. The beach had recharged us, and the next destination was already calling.

As the coast slowly slipped away behind us, the bus carried us through a bare, sun-drenched landscape. Mountains and sea alternated until we reached the small town of Las Negras.

From there it was about another five kilometres on foot to our destination - narrow, rocky paths winding through the rugged hills. Only Guiri seemed to think differently. He chose his own way, whenever he felt like it. Sometimes he disappeared so long that I had to stuff him in my inside pocket - a temporary prison from which he wriggled free within minutes. In the end, we decided to let him be. Whether he came along or not was up to him.

San Pedro

Eventually we reached the valley. It was strikingly warm for the time of year - warmer than in Granada, milder than where we had come from that morning. San Pedro, wedged between two imposing rock faces and with a beach only a few hundred metres long, felt like a natural heat trap. The earth was cracked by drought, shaped by generations of heat and scarcity. And yet there was something gentle in the air.

The sun shone brightly, though not yet merciless. It hovered over the valley, as if in thought, caressing the sand, the stones, the weathered walls of the ruins.

A little inland stood an old ruin - once a coastal watch-post, or the remote winter residence of some forgotten nobleman. The walls were half collapsed, but their contours

still marked the landscape. It seemed the heart of what had once been a community.

There were a few people wandering on the beach, but we decided to put down our things first. Contact would come later. First we explored the ground. The soil was rocky, with patches of fine sand slipping between our toes. Behind the ruin the ground inclined softly, blending into the barren, reddish slopes of the mountains that enclosed the valley like protective arms.

This area, behind the Sierra Nevada, received hardly any rain. The mountains held back the moist western winds, turning the hinterland into a dry, semi-desert region.

Somewhere nearby lay the mini-Hollywood where Sergio Leone had shot his spaghetti westerns. The landscape fit the part perfectly: dusty, sweltering, desolate, and oddly timeless. It gave those films their air of harshness - as if the struggle of existence could be captured in a single image.

The ruin turned out to be inhabited - by whom, we didn't yet know. Around it stood a few small structures, all in miserable shape. A roof over our heads was out of the question, that was immediately clear. But within a walled space, its floor covered in sand, we could stay undisturbed. Privacy in the open air. For now, that was enough.

The afternoon passed quietly. We settled in, gathered wood, and let the sun's warmth sink into us. Now and then we saw someone in the distance: a man studying a shell by the shore, a woman carrying a jerrycan to the spring. A brief wave, no words.

At sunset the valley glowed copper-red, and the shadow of the cliff stretched slowly across the beach. The water shimmered like molten metal. We lit our first fire in San

Pedro, feeding it with scraps of wood that cracked in the flames.

In that glow, the faces of the others appeared. An Irishman held a mug of tea close to his face, gently blowing at the steam. A young German tucked his feet close to the fire and drew his knees under his chin. Ute greeted us with a broad smile, while Javier, a quiet Spaniard beside her, laid a piece of wood on the fire and nodded briefly. It felt less like a first encounter than a reunion after a long walk.

The next day they offered us a piece of canvas. I stretched it between the walls to make a roof, mainly for shade against the fierce sun. Now we were complete. Shelter, for as long as it lasted.

Sometimes day-trippers arrived by motorboat - the quickest way to reach San Pedro. But by evening they were gone again, leaving behind only our little circle.

Slowly a rhythm took shape, a mood of shared silence and exchange. When the sun slipped behind the cliffs and its last glow warmed the sand, we gathered by the fire. We sat in a half-circle, wrapped in blankets or sleeping bags, sometimes with a cup of tea, sometimes with nothing at all.

By the Fire

Smoke wove itself into our clothes while the sea whispered against the coast. Guiri would curl into Reme's lap, Fango at her feet, dozing off in the warmth. The fire pulled us together, and slowly the words began flow. At first hesitant, then with more ease. Stories rose up - of the families we had left behind, about being on the road, about dreams and the darker sides of life.

Jürgen was the youngest among us, a German boy not

yet twenty who had made the ruin his home all winter. His skin was deeply tanned, his eyes clear and observant.

He spoke of his mother, of the crushing expectations and the suffocating mold of German respectability. He came from wealth, a family obsessed with status and success. Above all, his mother's grip weighed heavily, her ambitions choking him. He wanted to break free, to choose his own path. With the money he had, he left for Spain. A leap into the unknown.

He expected that he would eventually return. For now, he sought experiences to arm himself against the norms that had been imposed on him.

"First, to find out who I really am," he said. "After that, we'll see."

Ute and Javier had arrived a day before us. She was German, he a gentle Spaniard. They weren't drifters - their camper was parked with family nearby. They planned to head for Morocco, but stayed here in the meantime. Ute and Reme had an instant connection.

Javier was preparing for what he had planned further on, by the Atlantic Ocean. With mask, wetsuit, fins and harpoon, he went into the cold sea in search of fish. Not always successfully, but on the occasions when he emerged from the water with a glistening catch and held his harpoon up in triumph, we all stood cheering on the beach.

Guiri and Fango celebrated too. They got the guts, the heads - or, if the fish was small, the whole thing. Guiri was always first in line, eyes flashing. Fango, the good-natured lug, was happy with the scraps.

The Seer

Collin was a seasoned drifter, a man who had long ago decided to leave ordinary life in Ireland behind. No home, no job, no solid ground beneath his feet - and yet he stood more firmly than many who possessed all of that. He lived on the margins, with an effortless calm, exactly where he belonged.

In Spain, and far beyond, he had his own network of places where he could stay. Farms, remote patches of land, communities of like-minded people who grew their own vegetables, kept a few animals, and sought a different way of living. Where only the seasons determined what needed to be done.

For now, he had withdrawn here, to the edge of the cliffs, where he could look out over the valley and the sea. A pause for rest before the work that would begin again with spring - sowing, building, tending, living from what the land was willing to give.

There was something about him. A kind of invulnerability that was not bravado, but rooted in trust, which he carried with him like an old cloak - weathered, yet strong. Deep down he seemed to know that whatever might come, things would unfold as they should. Nothing could truly affect him. Not now, and not in the future. As if he could see through time.

He never hurried. He knew when to remain silent, when to wait. It seemed as though he understood the patterns by which life unfolds, and felt no need to interfere.

Collin had a remarkable story. He spoke of two forces that, according to him, would shape the near future.

"Don't be surprised," he said, "if before long all kinds of

things come to light about the elite of this world-their excesses, their hidden existence."

He spoke calmly, almost thoughtfully.

"They live far from the light, in shadowy realms beneath the surface. There they undermine what we call civilization."

The fire crackled softly.

"Their wealth and power are born of a relentless hunger for possession. They have allied themselves with dead matter, and thus with death itself. That is why everything they produce already carries the seed of decay. They are capable of deeds that defy all comprehension."

Now and then Javier nodded slowly, as if grasping the essence without needing every word. Reme and Ute sat close together, their faces half-lit by the fire, hovering between fascination and doubt. And I-I felt something stir inside me. Perhaps an uncomfortable truth. Or simply the force of someone who believes what he says.

"They imagine themselves invulnerable," Collin continued, "and with the means at their disposal they try to bend the course of events to their will. War. Manipulation. Intimidation. Slavery. They recognize no moral boundaries. But make no mistake: their misdeeds will become visible. However powerful they believe themselves to be - the light cannot be held back."

Javier tossed another piece of wood onto the fire. Sparks shot upward like tiny stars in the warm night. Reme stroked Fango's head. We listened in silence.

"Their insight is limited," he went on. "Blinded by their craving for matter and the glorification of themselves, they live in darkness. However brilliant their plans may seem - what they produce will amount to no more than a ripple on the ocean."

He fell silent and looked up. A gust of wind passed over the fire.

“Time is accelerating,” he said gravely. “What once took centuries now happens in months. What took years unfolds in days. And what required months will take place in hours. Technological, social, and other developments follow one another at a breakneck pace. Awareness is growing. The elite will try to push their agenda forward ever faster and destroy everything that is human - because deep down they know their time is running out.”

He let his gaze travel over us.

“Opposed to this stands the other force. Invincible gentleness. They fear it most, because before it they must bow. What they have mocked all their lives will then become their master - the greatest humiliation, and at the same time the only liberation.”

After that, silence fell. Even the crickets seemed to hold their breath. The flames flickered, shadows danced across our faces. The moon cast a silver path across the calm water. Collin sat slightly bent forward, like a seer at the edge of a world in decline, his gaze fixed on something we could not yet see.

Then he spoke again, softly:

“Don’t forget - that so-called elite is ultimately ourselves. A part of us longs for comfort, for wealth, for ease. For effortless money without guilt. Between the lure of power and possession, and bowing to love, yawns a chasm we call being human.

The seed of destruction lives in each of us. Do not point to the other. The real struggle takes place deep within. The outer world is merely the stage - a mirror of ourselves.”

The words hung heavy, like smoke that would not lift. The fire continued to crackle softly. We stared at the

flames, the waves, or at nothing at all, each lost in private thought.

No one spoke. There was no joke to break the mood, no sober remark to return us to the everyday. We all had to admit it: yes, that seed lives in me as well.

Only later, when everyone had gone and I was lying beside Reme watching the stars, did I think back to another moment - just a few days earlier in Almería - the strange man who spoke of the return of Christ.

Where he spoke of the awakening of Christ-consciousness, Collin now spoke of invincible gentleness. Two names for the same light that, sooner or later, would touch everyone and everything.

Two men, two words, one message: the light returns. *A promise is a promise.*

In the distance a wave struck the rock face softly, as if the sea itself were confirming it.

Constipation

The next day began with creaking bones, a dry throat, and an uncomfortable tension in the lower abdomen. Night's visions dissolved into the reality of the body. The mind had feasted; the flesh rebelled.

For groceries we had to go to Las Negras, along the same narrow, rocky mountain path as before - an undertaking. So we started with what we had: beans, rice, lentils. Within days our stomachs began complain. The shift from warm, soft meals drenched in olive oil to this dry, stubborn fare gave us cramps. I tried to forage, but the thorn-ridden desert plants were mostly unfamiliar. I did manage to find thyme and rosemary, thriving stubbornly in the barren soil. But they brought no relief.

Ute saved us. She went to the village often, and sometimes returned with treasures - bread, vegetables, whatever she could carry. Thanks to her, our diet became more bearable.

Life beyond time

San Pedro felt like a place where time dissolved. Light, days, even thought itself moved slowly. The outside world had slipped away. We slept beneath the stars, washed in a spring, cooked over an open fire, and spent hours stretched on the sand. The wind whispered through the valley; the sea breathed calmly in and out. There was no schedule, no rush - only the sun rising and falling.

Our days filled with almost nothing: drifting along the beach, tending a fire, talking. It was March, still mild. Each morning we searched the tide line for useful things: rope, tarps, bottles, crates. Once, the sea gifted us planks and beams, which we dragged back to the ruin. Jürgen's imagination lit up - he spoke of rebuilding, of finding tools: a saw, a hammer, nails.

The animals thrived. Guiri darted after insects and shifting shadows, restless and playful. Fango wandered, sniffed, rolled in the sand, raised his head to the wind. They knew no fences, no boundaries. And when dusk painted the sky and the ground cooled, they returned to us of their own accord.

At times I climbed the rocks to see what lay hidden above. The terrain looked like the remnants of a mountain that had once broken apart and collapsed down one side. Everything lay skewed and tilted, as if the earth had once shrugged its shoulders. The vegetation had adapted to that

chaos: hard, dry, thorny - plants driven by survival rather than beauty.

Aloe Vera reigned everywhere, like an octopus flipped upside down, its fleshy arms bristling with hooks. A quiet conqueror. Demanding little, offering much - a pharmacy disguised as a plant.

Snakes sometimes slid across my path. Mice squealed into hiding. Toads wedged themselves into cracks. Scorpions and lizards skittered under the sun. Birds of prey traced circles overhead, vanishing for days, then returning without warning. I found empty nests, pellets of bones and feathers - their leftovers.

There was a small insect, quick and nameless, with a sting that burned for days. Luckily, it kept to the inland hills.

San Pedro became an interval, a suspension, where duties and anxieties simply faded. Only we, the animals, the sand, the sea remained. Days blurred like tides, endless and without edges - until, deep inside, restlessness returned. A craving for movement, for the pulse of streets, for the sharpness of daily life.

After three weeks we left, heading back to our cave in Granada. Strange to walk away from the quiet sea and the soft rhythm of San Pedro - but the hills called, with their hardness and their promises.

Back to Granada

For the return journey we chose a different route. On the way there we had come along the coast; now we wanted to go back through the mountains - along the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, via Guadix. From Las Negras we needed to reach Almería first, and from there catch the bus. Fortune smiled: a German gave us a lift, heading the same way.

On the road he spoke of his recent purchase - a ruin in the hills, bought for next to nothing. He wanted hands to help restore it: no pay, only food and a bed. I weighed the thought briefly, then shook it off.

'Why should I labour for someone else's dream?' I wondered.

If I had wanted to build something there myself, But I didn't. Our road led back to our own life - the cave, the street. I thanked him and we parted at the Almería bus station.

But there the plan unraveled. The bus to Guadix had been cancelled, with no explanation. We didn't want to hang around, so we walked out of town, thumbing a ride. And with Reme along, that wasn't so hard. She had a presence even drivers couldn't ignore. Soon a man in a battered car stopped. Guadix? Impossible - the road closed by a truck accident. Granada? Yes, but by way of the Alpujarras, the Sierra's southern flank. We nodded.

That ride took us part of the way. Others followed. Slowly, the land transformed. The dry, brittle palette of San Pedro gave way to orchards and fields - almonds, oranges, olives, grass rolling down the slopes. The air softened, grew damp. The wind carried scents of earth, blossom, fresh growth.

We had entered the Alpujarras - the Sierra's oasis, once the Moors' last refuge. Their mark was still visible in the architecture of the villages, and even in the name Alpujarras: *Al Busherat*, Arabic for 'grassland.' The Sierra gave freely here. From its proud summits the snowmelt trickled downward, weaving through brooks and channels, humbly feeding the valleys and their people.

The road wound narrow along cliffs. Ravines yawned like mouths below. White villages clung to the mountain-

sides like shells to stone, ancient, steadfast. At times we walked stretches, water always nearby - whispering through fountains, canals, rivulets.

Spring had already claimed the valleys. Blossoms flared, grass gleamed, even the silence sounded different. Birds, bees, and the faint bells of a distant herd filled the air.

Our final ride of the day was with a farmer on a tractor. He waved us into the trailer, bumping along until he turned into his land. Dusk fell. A roof for the night was welcome. We found it in an old barn - empty, fairly clean, hay scraps still scattered on the floor. Good enough. We stayed.

By the following afternoon, Granada lay before us. We climbed the hill at once, anxious to see the cave. To our relief Johannes' gate still stood, unbroken, untouched.

As though no time had passed, we slipped back into the old rhythm. Yet the scene was never the same - some faces gone, new ones appearing. Among them was Warren, a figure who would remain etched in our memory.

Boast or truth?

We met Warren soon after we returned to Granada. A thin, restless Englishman with a vacant stare and a harmonica that almost never left his lips. He said he was running from the law back home, though the details he kept hidden. He had drifted through France and Spain by sneaking aboard trains - 'jumping the trains,' he said with pride.

At first he tried, like us, to make a living on the streets. The harmonica was a recent find. He had no music in him, but blew away with stubborn zeal. You could hear him from far off when he came by - and he came often. Success was scarce: his playing was poor, the coins few. Yet he insisted he deserved more.

Warren became friends with Jorge, a Portuguese, though he invariably called him George. Together they took a cave beyond an old stone wall running down from the monastery to Sacromonte. They had a beautiful view there. They looked out over the entire city and the endless olive groves to the west.

Jorge didn't make a living from music either. He was more interested in elderly widows dressed in black who could use a bit of male affection. That way he hoped to coax some money out of them, but that didn't work very well either. Warren quickly grew tired of street life and decided to change course radically: hash dealing.

In Granada the trade belonged mostly to the gypsies, who had no time for small fry. But Warren was cunning. He went around to every foreigner he knew, especially the British, asking if they wanted hash. If they did, he asked for payment up front - he'd arrange it. Many agreed. With the money he struck a deal with gypsies. But when it came time to deliver, he often failed. With some he kept his word; with others he did not. They had to make do with excuses, or with nothing at all. The losses were small, and no one wanted trouble. A Scottish busker: '*Not worth putting someone in hospital for.*'

Warren vanished for a spell. Then, suddenly, there he was again at our cave - unchanged in rags, but full of fresh tales. Now, he said, he dealt in larger amounts. No more street sales, steady buyers. I doubted him, as always. He looked the same: the same threadbare clothes, the same cave with Jorge. A drifter still, never a businessman.

He told of a woman - a madam - who supplied him.

"I went there like walking into hell. Eyes open, no choice. Outskirts of the city. Third floor. A black door with a steel peephole that saw everything. No need to knock. They

already knew. Inside: darkness. Curtains drawn, the air thick with smoke. A single lamp over a round table. She sat there, frozen marble, only her eyes alive. Around her: three men, silent walls. One clicked a butterfly knife open and shut - *click, click, click*.

I knew it: one wrong look, one wrong tone - and I would never surface again. No questions, no explanations. I paid. Got what I came for. No handshake, no words. Just a slab of hash and a look you don't forget. Every time I came out of there alive, I counted my blessings.'

After that, he carried a knife of his own. Large. Always ready. He trusted no one.

Then, almost casually, he told me he had stabbed a man.

'I'd left her place,' he said. 'Had a big slab under my coat when someone jumped me. Tried to take it. I wasn't having that. So I stuck him.'

I asked, 'And then?'

'Walked on. Left him there. If he's dead, that's his own fault.'

He spoke so lightly that I could hardly believe it. In Granada news travelled fast - but I heard nothing, no one spoke of blood or knives. Even when I asked around, no one knew a thing. To me, it was another of Warren's stories - one of many.

That was the last time I heard him. He vanished again, and no one seemed to know where. Until one afternoon I met someone who knew him. When I asked where Warren was, he answered dryly:

'They found him in Algeciras. Hanging from a tree. Probably the gypsies.'

I stared at him, stunned. *So it was true after all.*

And like that, Warren was gone from our lives - as suddenly as he had come. What remained was a void, hard

to name. In these hills we were used to companions coming and going - but not like this.

His absence still weighed in the air when the next loss arrived, this time closer to our own home.

Two Graves

Fango took ill. With no money for a vet, we tried to mend him ourselves. Reme bought medicine, but it never took. Each day he waned. People said street-born dogs are fragile, quick to sicken. Still, we wagered that love and attention might tip the scales.

It wasn't to be. He didn't survive. We laid him to rest in the woods. Reme was shattered - wracked with guilt, certain she had failed him. She wanted another puppy at once, one that would live. And so it came: a tiny thing with a thick blond coat, pricked ears, and black bead eyes. Reme took it straight to heart.

But within weeks this one sickened too, and again we said goodbye. After that, we'd had enough - both of us.

Only Guiri let it all pass untroubled, a quiet witness to our losses. By then he'd become a sturdy, healthy wanderer - anything but shy; meddlesome and affectionate in the best way. Each day he did his circuit: friends and familiar doorways, a scrap of food here, a stroke of the hand there. He ate whatever was offered and asked for little. Some nights he slept elsewhere, and that was fine. His company felt like a gift he gave freely.

It made things simpler for us, too. When we headed down, we no longer had to bring him. Guiri managed on his own. He was one of us - self-reliant, free, and always, in the end, finding his way back home.

Reme and I

We'd been together for about half a year. Life wasn't smooth - far from it - but between us there was a rare, natural ease. Almost nothing needed saying or planning. We were. Together.

Reme carried a quiet strength - soothing and challenging at once. She could sit in silence for hours without it ever feeling strained. She'd watch the sky, the animals, the fire - and then, out of nowhere, say something plain and true. Something beyond my grasp, without wasting many words on it.

Her presence was soft. A glance, a touch, a shared moment - often that was enough. At night she'd lean into me while the flames danced and the sky slid from blue to black. Life with her felt like a long, held breath.

A place of rest where I didn't have to be anything but myself - and she was there, steady as a rock.

She often took it on herself. When I didn't want to play - when inspiration ran dry and the same songs started to grate - she went down to town. She'd play, or she'd beg. She made sure we could stay up there a few more days. No complaints, resolve: do what needs doing.

And yet it all felt provisional. A bubble we'd blown together - floating above a world bound to burst. Almost surreal, a shape that couldn't last. A life without a future, survival. Day by day. No grip, no safety net. Always pushing on, with no end in sight.

But as long as that bubble didn't burst...

Putting it to the test

However easy and warm life with Reme felt, an old question kept circling inside me - something I couldn't argue away, something I had to test on my own first. What happens when you lose everything? No money. No food. No roof. No handholds at all.

It's the ultimate fear for most people: losing every certainty. But how real is that fear? Would I starve, fall ill, burn out? Or would something else appear - something you only meet once you let everything go?

I wanted to break through a barrier. To lift a veil. To look fear in the eye and see what would happen - to me, to the world around me, to those I'd meet.

So I stopped postponing. I wanted to know. Firsthand. Put it to the test.

The plan: head out with no money, no guitar, no sleeping bag. Only ask for food or somewhere to sleep. Don't accept cash. I told Reme. After talking it through she understood why. She stayed in the cave, unworried. Thanos and Yannis were close by.

I left on foot. I even gave away my coat - the one Guiri once slept in - to someone I met. West of Granada I climbed into the hills, a country that felt both familiar and strangely new. The road wound through parched slopes, olive trees to the horizon. Empty houses, flaking walls, dogs exploding from the shade to bark. Sometimes hours passed without seeing a soul.

At first it was mostly adjustment. Owning nothing means: no distraction. Everything lands. Heat on your skin. Pebbles in your shoe. The smell of the air. Above all: yourself. The voices, the doubt, the fear. No roof, no bed, no income. Only trust - or trying to.

By evening I reached a village. Hunger gnawed. Instead of earning, I had to ask. That took nerve - but my stomach won. I walked into a bakery and said I had no money; could they spare a loaf? The woman looked to the boss in the back, who nodded. She pulled a big baguette from the basket and even wrapped it neatly. I thanked her, honestly surprised by how easy it was.

Down the street was a cheesemonger. I showed the bread and asked for a piece of cheese. He didn't hesitate, cut a generous wedge and handed it over. We had never bought a piece that large - too expensive.

Buoyed, I went to a corner grocer. Apples were stacked outside. I pointed at one and asked if I could have it. He grabbed a plastic bag, filled it with apples, tossed in some oranges, and said, 'Toma' - 'Take it.'

I gave a small bow, thanked him, and walked on to a fountain with drinking water.

Bread, cheese, fruit. So much given - without me giving anything back.

It hit me more than I could say. What struck me most was the natural ease of the gesture. In that moment, I felt seen as a human being. Vulnerable, visible, dependent - and welcome for exactly that reason.

Out on the fields again, a car pulled over. The driver rolled down his window: where was I headed? 'No idea,' I said.

I told him about what I was doing. He immediately offered money; I said no. My single rule. He got it. It gave a curious power - being dependent, yet able to refuse.

As night drew in I had to find a place to sleep. I couldn't drop anywhere like we used to; I had no sleeping bag. My survival sense kicked in. In the dark I heard music in the

distance. Closer, it came from a house where a group of kids were partying. A girl stood at the door.

She'd already spotted me and waved me inside. A quick intro, then out to the garden where fifteen or so sat around a fire. Beats from speakers, laughter, drinks. She shouted over the music that she'd picked me up off the street.

'Our mystery guest!'

Faces turned, people laughed, waved me in.

My Spanish was good enough to keep up. When I said I was travelling without money or belongings, they loved it. They cheered me on, filled my glass, passed food. They made room. I belonged.

When the volume came down, a guitar appeared. Singing started. I played along, sang a couple of songs. The room warmed; it grew intimate.

That night I slept in a spare room, and in the morning they handed me a sandwich for the road.

So I moved from village to village, south to north and back. Food everywhere, welcome everywhere. Restaurants gave me meals. Cafés kept the drinks coming. People wanted to help - with clothes, food, advice, money. Some thought I was a pilgrim on the way to Santiago. Perhaps I was. For slowly I began to feel what this journey truly was. Not an experiment. Not a stunt. But an exercise in trust.

Encounters took on an almost sacred charge. A crust of bread, a gesture, a glance - became precious. Not for what it was worth, but for what it meant: that you were allowed to be here. That even with nothing to offer, you could still be welcome. Again and again, my view of other people shifted.

And there were the little turns - a sudden party, an invite, a meal, a bar night. Things that presented themselves as grace, because I was open to them. That's what I learned: if you let everything go, you sometimes receive more than

you ever dared ask for. That was the beauty: an invisible web of humanity that kept catching you, without anyone asking.

After a week or two the magic thinned. Routine crept in. Expectation displaced wonder. Gratitude shrank. That was when I knew: enough.

Those weeks taught me that the bottom of life isn't a chasm, but a field that sometimes holds you. Unexpectedly. Kindly. Through people - through their goodness. It brought a calm.

I'd found what I was looking for. A line had moved. I returned to Reme, to the cave, to our life above the city. Summer was about to begin, and it had its own trial: endurance.

Summer Heat

The heat of Andalusia showed no mercy. It was my first summer in Granada, and it pressed upon me with a weight that was almost unendurable. Even inside the cave, which normally stayed cool thanks to the thick layer of earth above it, there was now a stifling warmth. Stepping outside felt like walking into a solid wall of fire. Cold can be fought; heat cannot - especially in a life without electricity, without a fan, without the luxury of air-conditioning.

Fortunately, the evenings and nights at that height still offered a measure of relief. The real challenge was simply enduring the hours in between.

On days like these I wandered more often into the city, where life pulsed and swirled. Street performers and musicians kept arriving in Granada - some drifting alone, others travelling as pairs or in entire troupes who lived from whatever the street offered them.

One such troupe was a band of English travellers

roaming Europe in a converted passenger bus. They staged a full street-theatre spectacle with circus acts. At Plaza Bib Rambla they performed: fire-breathing, acrobatics, stilt-walking, juggling, a clown - all behind painted faces, bright costumes, and wild wigs. They knew exactly how to enchant a crowd. Their antics worked, and the proof lay in their hat: always heavy with coins.

I visited them a few times inside their bus. Everything was immaculately arranged: a kitchen, bunks, a wood stove, a seating corner, toilet, shower, stereo - everything a wanderer could dream of. The idea of crossing Europe with such a troupe seemed glorious. But the longer I thought about it, the more I understood: travelling alone was the path that truly belonged to me.

Costa del Sol

When Granada's heat got brutal, Reme and I slipped down to the Costa del Sol. Also to earn a bit of extra money. I'd busk outside the restaurants; in minutes I could earn more than hours on the street. I never loved it. I felt exposed - on display to the terrace crowd. It always took nerve to step up. Sometimes the comments came: patronizing, mocking. They cut deeper than I liked to admit.

So there I was, guitar in hand, teetering on the edge of the terrace. On a thin line. My fingers found the strings, my voice came out. Inside: turmoil. I tried to shut it all out - the setting, the stares, the hostility. Because that's what the world felt like then: hostile. Failing to meet expectations - the sour legacy of my youth - and I was back in that fight. Every glance was a verdict. Averted eyes, muffled snickers, snide asides - needles, cold and sharp.

It was a struggle that remained invisible from the

outside. I smiled, nodded when someone gave a thumbs-up, cracked a joke between songs. In reality, it was survival.

After I had played my songs, glances remained, and it often took a while before I could shake them off.

Still, I kept my ground. Every time. As if each note clawed back a sliver of dignity - a small win in a war no one noticed.

The inner fight didn't hold me back. We drifted from one seaside resort to the next, sleeping most nights on the beach. It felt like a holiday of sorts - by the water, amid the tourists, as if we'd slipped into another world. Now and then, when the takings were good, we treated ourselves to dinner - a rare indulgence.

So we balanced between beaches and streets, between work and pleasure.

Back in Sacromonte, we stayed on the hill for a while and lived off the money we had earned, until reality forced us back onto the streets.

In the city I would then often see new faces around.

A Swedish street musician playing with his girlfriend on Plaza Bib Rambla, she on a blanket with a thermos beside her. A drunk hurling insults at anyone who didn't give. A French pair of beggars - one calling 'algo' on repeat, the other watching in silence.

Sometimes they were gone by evening; sometimes they stuck around for weeks. Fellow travellers, drifters, dreamers - people who had stepped out, or been pushed out - each with a story, a fight. And sometimes, among those passing meetings, one stayed - someone who slowly became part of our days. That's how Sid showed up one day: a German teenager.

Sid

For a while he hovered at the edge of the square, half lost in the wall's shadow. His eyes flicked our way, but whenever we looked back, he turned away. He seemed to be testing whether he dared come closer.

When he finally walked over, I took him in: thin, a blue mohawk, ears and lip pinned with safety pins. A sleeveless denim vest plastered with band patches and the inevitable punk motto - '*No Future.*' A belt of metal badges, green striped trousers frayed above tired army boots. He called himself Sid, after his hero Sid Vicious.

He didn't busk - no music, no street act; he begged. Trouble with his father, ran away. He'd drifted through France, couldn't settle, and fetched up in Granada. Taking his chances. It suited him here.

He began appear more often, usually out of the blue, hoping his presence would simply count as welcome. He wouldn't sit right with us - kept a little distance, on the fringe of the talk. Sometimes he only watched, with that empty yet alert look you see in people trained to read the room - for rejection, for openings, for danger.

When Reme spoke to him, he lit up. He didn't follow her Spanish, but her tone - her way of being - reached him. Reme spoke less in words than in warmth, something you felt regardless of language.

He'd straighten; his eyes cleared. He talked about before - his father, his life in Germany. Not complaining, more explaining. As if to account for his wandering.

His outreach was awkward. He'd show a thing he'd found, ask a question about nothing. Underneath: the same hunger - to be seen, to be heard, to belong. Careful, almost apologizing.

He liked our company. Especially Reme's. She sensed what he needed. He came by often.

With me he held back. He looked up to me - I could tell - but wouldn't show it. I was harder on him. I warned him: on the street you have to make something, do something, or the temptations eat you alive.

'Keep yourself busy,' I said. 'Or it goes wrong.'

He took it to heart. Next time he brought a small pipe he'd shaped from clay. He held it in both hands, like something fragile. His eyes gleamed - proud, tense, waiting. He didn't say much - that was him - but everything asked for acknowledgment. A nod. A kind word. Anything. I studied it and came up empty. It was crooked, the rim already crumbling. Rough work. But he'd clearly sat down to make it - for me.

I answered like a foreman: it had to be better if anyone was to use it. The words hit like stones. His face barely changed, but something broke. A thin membrane tore between hope and memory.

He nodded, said he understood. His eyes went flat. The disappointment was there - like touching something old and heavy: that worn thought, *I never get it right.*

Regret landed at once. He was so breakable that each refusal felt like a blow. So young, already on the street - dangerous ground. He'd come to me for something - brotherly steadiness, not least because I spoke German. But I couldn't give it. I was wrestling with too many doubts of my own. The stability he sought, I didn't have either.

After that he came around less. Sometimes I saw him off to the side with others. We still traded a distant hello. Quietly, something had cracked - we both knew.

It had nothing to do with Sid - or everything. At times I felt his gaze reflect what I kept trying not to see - that his

pain was also mine, and I barely knew what to do with it. Like him, I was fighting for something you can't show: proof that you matter.

I asked about him every so often, but I already knew he'd moved on - not so much to another place as into another story, one I wasn't in.

At times he'd flash into my mind - his disappointment, my failure.

The Breakdown

Summer was fading. The swelter had passed. Even so, we made one last run to the Costa - to scrape together some money, and because I needed a passport from the Dutch consulate in Málaga. I'd gone almost nine months without one; nobody had asked for ID the whole time. Luck, mostly.

Still, it felt like time. something in me was shifting, something I couldn't name yet.

On the road back, I cracked.

We thumbed rides toward Granada. Night fell. No more lifts. By the roadside, in a cornfield, we found an open clearing. We bedded down there.

At first light we woke in someone else's filth. Everywhere. We were lying in it. Human waste.

Something in me snapped.

The life I was leading - the street, the no-way-out, the sense of belonging nowhere - came down like a blade. That patch of ground wasn't filthy; it was a mirror. This was my life. My humiliation. I had failed. Nothing had come of me. I couldn't hold a 'normal' life, much less make myself or anyone else happy. A failure. Unworthy of being here.

I could see no escape. Everything had lost its meaning. Why do I live? Why was I even placed on this earth? I never

asked for it. Who, or what, has inflicted this on me? This cursed life.

Death felt more welcome than life. To be nothing - that sounded like release. I dropped to my knees. Clods scraped my legs. I cried with everything I had, until my voice broke under the pain and frustration. Everything let go. No words. No hope. No future.

Reme froze. She tried to soothe me; I held her off. I wanted to carry it alone.

But we had to keep moving. Hitchhiking was out - we reeked. We wouldn't do that to anyone. The beach was a few kilometers away; there'd be a tap somewhere. We'd wash our clothes - and ourselves.

For days I moved like a shadow. Nothing but questions with no answers. Why am I here? Who chose this life for me? I never asked for it - so why must I endure it?

No direction, no frame, no because. Only the raw fact of being. Life went on around me, and I seemed cut loose from it. People talking, laughing, eating, working - it passed through me. There was a wall between me and the world.

And God - where was He? What remained of the trust I'd built? Faith, which once held me, now hung like a severed thread above me. No connection. No sign. No comfort. Only silence.

But in that very silence, something began to live. Not a flash, not an answer. Something small.

A smell. A mild morning breeze. A bird landing close, unafraid. A child who caught my eye and smiled for no reason. Guitar sounds drifting up from Sacromonte.

Things began show themselves again. No answers. Only presence. As hints that something remained. That I remained.

Gradually, there was space again. I was allowed to

witness something that continued to unfold, even without my understanding. The big questions stayed, but they hurt less. They stopped demanding to be solved. They could be there. And so could I.

In time I got back on my feet. A few weeks later the old routine had me again - as if nothing had happened. Everything looked ordinary, until the next crisis came knocking.

Drifting Apart

Something had shifted between Reme and me. What used to be a given - closeness, companionship, give-and-take - had lost its colour. We still lived together, but shared less. Warmth remained, without a flame.

The gap didn't appear overnight. For a while we'd both felt the rub and left it unnamed.

She was kind, loyal, patient - at times too yielding. She went along with me, without charting her own course. I missed the grit that sharpens you: pushback, challenge. Our talk circled the practical - water, wood, food - rarely what I secretly longed for: books, ideas, the larger questions.

Reme, for her part, dreamed of children and a life we'd build together. I couldn't imagine it. A family on the street seemed less a prospect than an impossibility - perhaps even irresponsible. Beyond that, I simply wasn't ready.

Sometimes we sat together eating in silence, simply because we had nothing to say. Spoons clicked against the bowls - the only sound there was.

She'd laugh at a thought of her own; I didn't ask. The old curiosity had gone. When I spoke of what was on my mind, she seemed to hear without catching it - my words dissolving before they had a chance to sink in. A gentle,

polite smile, and behind it a distance: a wall of thoughts I no longer reached.

Slowly it became clear how far apart our ways of thinking and experiencing the world were. We lived together, but in two separate lives that drifted ever farther apart, without finding words for it.

What we had began resemble siblingship: caring, familiar, sparkless. We looked after each other, but the roles were fixed. She cast me as the one who decided, knew the way, kept her safe. I didn't want that part. I wanted a peer. It wasn't a shared journey anymore.

Sometimes I looked at her and tried to summon the old feeling. It didn't return. In its place: a quiet, unmistakable turn - away from her, toward something I couldn't yet name, as if a door, somewhere in the distance, already stood slightly open.

The Rift

Around that time I met Cyrille, an English girl working for a British firm, curious about the caves. We'd crossed paths a few times while I was busking. Small, a little plump, pretty, with a coil of black curls. Friendly, yes - but bold. She pushed, asked intimate questions as if boundaries didn't exist. It grated, but I let it pass.

Neat as a pin, she didn't belong among us. I wondered what she was after. I told her she could stop by the cave. She loved it - after that she turned up a few more times on her own. The last time I happened to be alone. Then it became clear that she was interested in me. She left no room for misunderstanding about her intentions. She knew that Reme lived here, but that left her indifferent.

That struck me as disrespectful. Who did she think she

was - that I'd pick her over Reme? I asked her to leave and told her not to come back.

Meanwhile Reme had decided I might be seeing 'the Englishwoman.' Through Charlotte she sent word that I was free to be with Cyrille - as long as I stayed with her.

It wasn't an accusation, not a quarrel. She said it almost gently, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. That was the cut. It showed how far we'd drifted. Once she would have met my eyes, taken my hand, asked, or spoken her mind. Now her message came by way of someone else, a strange compromise.

That, for me, was the break. We no longer understood each other. That she could offer herself up like that - I couldn't fathom it: to erase herself so I would remain, to let me believe I was worth everything.

I wasn't. I wouldn't humiliate her - least of all let her humiliate herself. It hit hard. The distance between us had set like concrete.

Farewell to Reme

My departure was delayed a little longer, but it was inevitable. When I walked down the mountain for the last time, my burden grew lighter with every step. My love for her was still there. At the same time, I finally saw that we could not give each other what we needed. The burden of the past months, filled with doubt, guilt, and conflicting desires, slowly began to loosen its grip.

Behind me, Sacromonte lay white and still against the slope, fixed in the morning light.

Lest We Forget

Relief came, and a mourning.

We hadn't made it.

The emptiness stayed.

Love wasn't enough.

Yet over the wound of parting,

A path began form - toward what lay ahead.

With a new longing - and a new scar.

Lest we forget.

Lest we forget who we are.

Hunger Strike

It sank in: I was free again - unaware the next city would test that freedom straight away.

I meant to head north. The bike was waiting. I had no idea how I'd pay for the repair, and I'd stopped caring. By then, that thing had come to symbolize a part of me I had lost along the way. That could wait. For now: travel-one step, one city at a time.

First stop: Cartagena. I set up in a shopping street. In Spain you never know where busking is allowed. My method was simple: start, and see. If it wasn't allowed, they'd tell me to move on.

Everything seemed fine. Several officers walked past without saying a word.

Then suddenly a man in plain clothes appeared, accompanied by an officer in uniform. The former - small, irritable, visibly frustrated - pointed at me and shouted, "*Pedir, pedir!*"

Begging. According to him, I was begging.

Anyone could see that I was making music. I wasn't holding out my hand, I wasn't asking for money. Still, he persisted. The uniformed officer stood there somewhat embarrassed, as if he didn't quite understand it himself, and tried in vain to calm his superior.

I had to pack up my things and go with them to the station.

They took everything and walked me to a basement cell.
'You'll be questioned later,' he said.

Hours later the chief came in swinging: begging, vagrancy, public disorder. He slid my pocketknife across the desk and called it a prohibited weapon. I said nothing, stared back, and played dumb about Spanish. Let them fetch an interpreter.

The uniformed officer sat there, visibly shaking his head at the accusations. When his superior stepped away for a moment, he whispered in broken German that he had been on holiday in Heidelberg several times.

'There are street musicians everywhere, and nobody makes a problem of it.'

He didn't understand the commotion either.

They'd called an interpreter, but not until the next day. So I sat in the cell. They offered a drink and a sandwich. I refused. Out of revulsion. The thought of being locked up for making music made me sick.

'I'd rather starve than take food from that man.'

That was the start of the hunger strike.

All night my cell stayed mine alone; next door the holding pen filled - drunks, junkies. I couldn't see them, only hear them. As the night wore on, the noise grew louder: jeering, shouting; frustrations vented against the barred fence that separated them from freedom.

I sat on a concrete bench under a harsh fluorescent tube

that never blinked. The air hung heavy with disinfectant, catching in my throat.

I meditated, trying to peel myself away from this space, this body, this ridiculous reality. Sometimes it worked - just for a moment - and it felt as though I'd escaped. But I couldn't hold that focus.

I tried to sleep, hoping that when I woke up the night would be over. But my fellow prisoners wouldn't allow it: I kept jolting awake at their noise. What remained was waiting for the liberating morning. Meanwhile, every second stretched on, like the harsh light that stayed on - dry, hard, merciless.

Beneath it all thudded a quiet anger. Injustice, humiliation, mostly the absurdity of it. Arrested like a beggar while I played. Reduced to something suspect, something to be cleared away. I refused. My only protest: no food, no drink.

Late next morning they fetched me for questioning. There was an interpreter present, but his English was terrible. Sometimes he translated things completely differently from what was said. I understood most of it and had to resist the urge to correct him - doing so would have given me away.

The chief still fumed, as if I'd wronged him personally. The uniformed colleague sat in again, which steadied me. He understood. The charges were rerun with yesterday's heat. I didn't flinch. I stared past them and denied the lot. Let them sort it out.

In the end the chief had nothing. He released me, with a paper ordering me to leave Spain within ten days.

On the way out I crushed the letter into a ball and dropped it, deliberately, in the bin.

That night held nothing dramatic: no torture, no blows. What seeped in was humiliation, and the loneliness that

eats at you when you realise you don't count. A nameless body behind bars, with no one to stand up.

Still, I didn't break. I clung to the one thing left: dignity. No sandwich, no nod, no bowing of the head. Only the voice within - that counted.

Emergency Stop

Walking out of the station I felt light-headed - not from freedom - that hadn't landed yet - but from more than a day without food and water.

My body begged for liquid. On the first corner: a tiny market. I went in on autopilot and bought a carton of orange juice. On the pavement I cracked it open and drained it in one pull. I shouldn't have.

A breath of relief - then the flip. My stomach bucked. Cramps rolled through me. Toilet. Now. I bolted into a bar.

'Bathroom's broken,' the barman said.

They say that to drifters and buskers; I didn't buy it. I hurried to the back. Door locked. I mumbled sorry and stumbled out. Panic rising.

Out on the street, I looked around wildly. No public toilet. No café that would have me. Hard sun and hotter asphalt. I walked faster.

The pressure in my gut was brutal. Then I saw a garage across the road.

'They'll have a bathroom,' and cut across.

'*Baño, baño!*' I yelled, rushing in.

A mechanic clocked me in a heartbeat and pointed to a door by the entrance.

Too late. The moment the door clicked shut, it happened. Everything let go - into my trousers, down my

legs - an endless spill. Shame and relief and helplessness in one.

Luckily it wasn't just a toilet but also a shower. I stripped, opened the tap, and rinsed myself - and my clothes - under the stream. The guys must have wondered what on earth I was doing. After over half an hour I emerged, clothes dripping onto the greasy concrete.

The man who'd waved me in came over. I apologized for the time and the hassle and tried to give him some money. He smiled and waved it off.

'*Buena suerte*,' he said.

Privacy

I followed the coast north - the way I'd come. Alicante first, then Barcelona. I'd never been; I wanted to see it. In the centre I drifted around and kept noticing how many people were sleeping rough. I knew that, of course - every big city has them - but here it finally landed how visible and invisible they are. I could choose. I didn't live on the street. I moved through it and could step out. Many couldn't. They'd slipped past the edge of society and there was no path back. Out there, life is hard. No rest. Nights without quiet. Always light, noise, motion. Always someone near.

Yet everyone needs something - a place where they can be themselves without being watched or judged. But those who live on the streets do not have that luxury. You can never truly be alone. Everything that should be private plays out in public. That turns the outside world into something you have to shut yourself off from. Being under the influence helps. Alcohol, drugs - a haze that protects you from the constant gaze of others.

I saw a homeless man masturbating in a park as pedes-

trians walked past. Not provocatively, discreetly, yet still visible. What normally happens in a safe, private space was taking place here on the grass, because he had nothing else. His boundaries had vanished, dissolved into the public space. The street had become his living room.

And I understood that what we call 'antisocial' may be our own behavior reflected back at us - only we keep ours behind doors. What we hide becomes public out there. Unfiltered. Rawer than we're used to.

Jumping the Trains

One day was enough. I slipped out of Barcelona. A ride took me to the French border; in Perpignan I chose a different way to travel. Warren had told me how he'd crossed France for free - *jumping trains*, hiding in the cars. I decided to try it.

At the station I checked the departure board and saw there was a train to Geneva that night.

'That's the one I need,' I thought.

Seats, a restaurant car, sleepers. In the last I found an empty compartment: four bunks, two and two. I had no real plan. The train slid out; I was still alone. The conductor could walk in at any moment. I needed a fix.

Over the door ran a broad luggage rack, above the top bunk, the width of the compartment. Enough room to lie down, with space for my gear. I climbed up, slid my guitar beside me, and ducked out of the light.

Later, passengers drifted in - one, then another. They must have been in the restaurant; we hadn't stopped. Light bags, no interest in the space where I lay. So far, so good.

Then another man came in, together with the conductor. He had two suitcases with him and wanted to place them on the rack above the door. But guitar, bag, and I

myself were in the way. The conductor tried to help by creating some space, but it didn't work. I made myself as small as possible and pressed all the way back, heart pounding in my throat. To my great relief, they eventually gave up.

Three bunks were occupied now; one remained empty. I thought about taking it - my place was far from comfortable - but I refrained. Luckily. Halfway through the night another man arrived with the conductor. He wanted to put his luggage down with me, but the conductor made it clear that there was no room.

I slept only half-asleep, curled up like a cat. When I woke up morning light pooled in the compartment. The men went to wash; one remained. I knew his face - a Swiss I'd seen at the Reithalle. His name was gone, but he knew me too.

I hesitated, shifted some things, spoke. A flinch, then recognition - then a smile. I climbed down and sat with him. Outside, green hills unspooled. I told him the story.

'We're almost there,' he said. 'Doubt they'll cheque again.'

He smiled.

'Pretend you came to visit me.'

The others drifted back; no one asked a thing. By Geneva I passed for a passenger. I made sure I was the last to leave the compartment, so I could take my belongings from the luggage rack without drawing curious looks.

At passport control my companion flashed his document and walked through. We said goodbye - we'd cross paths in Bern. They kept me.

A customs man pulled me from the queue. Where was I headed? Knew anyone here? Money? Drugs? He leaned on me, certain I used.

'Never smoke a joint?' he said.

'I don't smoke,' I answered.

True - cigarettes, at least. The rest was none of his business. He leafed through my passport, paused at 'Henderiks,' and made the connection to Jimi Hendrix. My wild mane of hair and a guitar on my back must have reinforced that image. I said that I was nowhere near being Jimi Hendrix and had no such ambition.

He held my gaze, shut the passport, handed it back, and waved me on.

Moments with Bädu

I reached Bern by afternoon - first a quick stop at the Reithalle, then on to the Q-Hof in the Lorraine. This time, Bädu was in.

There was always a riddle to us, a quiet pact you could feel but never name. He wasn't the open-arms type, yet I felt received. His warmth lived in small things: a nod, a mug of tea, a mattress under the rafters. And the space he gave you to be yourself..

The Freakhotel days were behind us, but he was still the same: alternately hospitable and absent, at times almost closed off in his own world. I'd learned not to take it personally. That was simply who he was, and if I respected that, we did fine. No expectations, no pressure. a bit of shelter beside someone who also refused to colour inside the lines.

That's what tethered us: a shared restlessness. A hunger for the real without a map to it. An instinctive allergy to the well-trodden and the over-polished. He had his art, his music, his path. I had mine - sometimes blown his way, never obliged to stay.

I told him about Spain and about the bike I'd left

behind. It needed fixing; I was broke. Bädu told me the Reithalle needed hands for the refurbishment - fifteen francs an hour. No great shakes, but enough to get my bike sorted.

I could sleep in the little attic room again.

Tile Setter

They needed someone to tile a urinal and a row of toilets. I'd never laid a tile, but I said yes - show me once. One of the crew ran through the basics: snap your lines, butter the wall with a notched trowel, set the tiles with a string line between them, then grout and sponge clean. Manageable enough. I got to it.

With work secured I checked the garage. The bike was still there. The bill was lower than feared - 2,000 instead of 2,500 francs. I struck a deal: weekly payments. Six days on, five hundred francs each week. Four weeks later, the bike was mine again.

Relief, and something sour. So much sweat and cash - for what? I could have spent it on anything but that 'stupid' bike.

He was there again. Restored, polished, ready to go. I still used him - out of convenience, for the miles. The spark didn't return.

The Reithalle job rolled on, though I took fewer shifts. On free days I sometimes rode: across the country, around Lake Geneva, to Gstaad - the rich folk's playground. Switzerland was beautiful, spotless, ordered. too spotless. Everything was in place - and yet something was off.

People like Bädu, his friends, the Reithalle squatters - they were a countercurrent. The country's wealth, they said, leaned on bank secrecy. It vacuumed up dirty money. Crimi-

nals, dictators, shady firms - here they could stash their capital without awkward questions. Some called it *a pact with the devil*.

Yet Switzerland had something unmistakably good: a social safety net. No one was left to fend for themselves. If you fell, you were caught. There were programmes, training paths, support. And democracy - direct democracy at that. Citizens could table proposals for a nationwide vote; in theory they could even scrap bank secrecy. But nothing ever changed.

As for the supposed wealth of the Swiss, Bädu had a down-to-earth take: "*As soon as they have a house and a car, they're poor again.*"

Hunting Syringes

Bädu took off on holiday again to Cuba and asked me to cover his shift: hunting syringes - *Pumpies suchen*, in his words. Each morning he walked a loop through town, collecting needles left behind or tossed away. The play-ground sandpits had to be clear before school; no one wanted a child pricked by a stranger's habit. I said yes, gladly. I could use his flat as well - a blessing after the attic. Two weeks away meant two weeks to myself.

The work was easy. Early starts were fine; I could always sleep later. My route ran close to the addicts' gathering spot. Unlike other European cities, Bern didn't scatter its users through alleys and stations; they pooled in one place: the Schänzli.

The Schänzli felt like a wound in the city - open, on display, half averted from. A grassy knoll behind a high hedge, a near-symbolic border between the orderly world

and decay. At the lone entrance stood a sterile little unit where people could inject.

What unfolded there was an open-air inferno. Boys and girls - some scarcely grown - stood together like husks, eyes emptied out. At times they seemed one shapeless mass: grey, beaten, unplugged from everything. For tourists it had almost become a sight to see: a peephole into the human abyss. The lost sons and daughters of a generation.

Switzerland tried another tack than crackdowns. Repression had failed. They opened supervised rooms: safe space, a bite and a drink, clean needles and condoms. The idea was simple: take it off the street and bring people within reach - of care, of counsel, of help. Pragmatic mercy.

My syringe rounds fit into that plan. Strip away the dangerous remnants fast. No hazard, no hassle.

And still, as I walked, one question kept circling: how can so many young people slip through in one of the richest, best-run countries on earth? Where did it go wrong?

The Bankrobber

Days slid past. Dawn rounds with grabber and bucket, skirting sandpits and hedges; after that, the day was mine. From time to time I helped out at the Reithalle, or worked temporarily in a record shop. In between, I sought out old acquaintances from the Freakhotel - Margot, Yamina - but most of the time I was alone.

I never really found a sense of belonging here. Maybe that was on me. A distance had crept in between me and the people around me, and I couldn't name it. It felt as if I'd let go of something along the way and couldn't find it anymore. I reached for contact while, at the same time, pulling back.

In Switzerland, where reserve is the default, that edge felt sharper.

Sometimes I drifted through town a little lost, without wanting to admit it.

One afternoon, I ran into another Dutchman at the Reithalle: Koos. He lived in a village near Zurich and invited me over. He played guitar too, he said; we could play together. It felt like a small opening, so I said yes.

A few days later I rode at an easy pace through rolling Swiss hills to his place. Not an alternative den, but a tidy glassy house in a modern development where everything looked the same. His Swiss girlfriend welcomed me warmly.

'This promised to be a pleasant afternoon,' I remember thinking.

The thought evaporated quickly. The music was stiff. He barely played the guitar; the rhythm never landed, though he thought we were flying. I did my best to keep the whole thing upright. When he suggested we hit local bars together, I knew: it wasn't going to happen. I tried to brake gently, but something in my tone nicked him. His face darkened; a tension set in.

Meanwhile he was knocking back beers; I kept to water - I had the bike. The more he drank, the looser he got. Proudly he told me how he and a friend had robbed a post office in the Netherlands years ago: eight hundred thousand taken, never caught. He burned through his share in two years.

'Mostly on sex clubs,' he grinned. 'It was a great time.'

Then came the trouble - when the money was gone. He'd grown used to plenty, and a regular job couldn't sustain that life. So he started selling drugs. That was his income now. He bragged about what he pulled in. I felt myself tighten. I didn't want to know any of this.

His tone changed. More insistent. He thought I didn't believe him. He wanted to prove that he was successful, that he was smart, that he lived well. I felt him working himself up, sensitive to every word, every gesture. It seemed my distance frustrated him. Sudden movements, nervously getting up and sitting down again. Then he suddenly said he had taken an LSD pill about an hour earlier.

My stomach sank. Reason was likely gone. I had to get out. His girlfriend had already left, and I was alone with a man growing more unstable by the minute - big, broad, unpredictable. Not someone to cross.

'I'll show you,' he snapped, and disappeared into another room.

He came back with a cardboard box, stuffed with hundred-franc notes.

'Fifteen thousand francs,' he said, fanning the bills across the table.

'This is mine. See?'

Now I was expected to believe him. The proof lay there. I nodded, kept my voice even.

After the cash had sat there, bare to the room, his bravado flipped to panic. In a rush he scraped the stacks together and shoved them under a thick wool sweater. With a belly like a pregnant woman he stood there, staring at me, at a loss. A moment later he vanished to the toilet. When he returned, his belly was flat. I noticed, briefly, and let it pass. One thought remained: the door. I told him I had to go; he kept pushing. He felt he hadn't landed his point. He wanted to say more; I didn't wait. I grabbed my things and left.

Two days later at the Reithalle, someone said a Dutchman was looking for me. He claimed I'd stolen 15,000 francs and that he'd kill me if I didn't bring it back. I went cold. I hadn't taken a thing.

Only then did the penny drop. He'd gone to the bathroom with that bulging belly - cash under his sweater - and come back flat. Could it be that, half out of his mind, he'd lifted his sweater to pee, let the money slip - straight into the bowl - and, in a fog, simply flushed?

Fifteen thousand francs - gone.

I couldn't explain it any other way.

For days I kept my guard up. I avoided the Reithalle. Others said he came back once more. After that, I never saw him again.

Heading Home

Bädu came back from holiday - loose, full of stories. He paid me fairly for keeping his job warm. No fuss: a handshake, a brief nod.

I'd already made up my mind: once he was back, I would leave. It had been enough. Switzerland had worked like a pause between chapters - necessary, not endless. I'd felt it for a while: time to see my family, to return to something familiar.

Maybe not for good. For now, yes.

THE ETERNAL CITY

TESTAMENTS OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

On the Road Again

I came back in autumn. Odd jobs kept me afloat, but I couldn't take root. The old gap only yawned wider. No kindred spirits here, no one I could share my inner weather with.

My old friends were married; some had children. A different life - the proper one, you might say. Work, marriage, offspring. Opening the gate for new souls to enter the world. Beautiful, not mine. I wanted the world. My own path. Adventure.

I knew everyone in the village, everyone knew me, yet the loneliness here cut deeper than when I drifted the streets alone. Out there, with the people I met, I felt connection. With them I could be myself. The lower the rung, the more at home I felt.

Winter was coming. I packed my things, slung the guitar over my shoulder, and set off.

À Paris

'À Paris!' I called to the cars tearing past, holding up my cardboard sign. From my village I'd aimed straight for a long haul - to Paris. Not to stay; I was headed further. First the Côte d'Azur, then I'd see.

The big jump didn't come easy. Most drivers took me a few exits at a time. Still, the sign worked: it made motorists curious. They wanted to know my story. Often there was sympathy. Some thought it brave, setting out like that.

When I said why I was on the road, I usually dressed it in romance: a boy living day by day, earning his keep with music, drifting from city to city across Europe. That they could picture.

The loneliness I left out. Too tangled - and I wasn't sure I understood it myself.

Temptation on the Sofa

By nightfall I'd reached Belgium. A young Flemish couple gave me my last lift and, when they offered a place to sleep, I didn't think twice. A small flat in Bruges: living room with a kitchenette, a separate bedroom, a tiny bathroom.

Evening wrapped the place in comfort. They cooked for the three of us. Pasta sauce, red wine, and something sweet from her perfume hung in the room. Night pressed against the windows; inside, the soft lamps warmed the air.

We drank wine on the sofa. She was keen, almost hungry. She sat beside me; her knees brushed mine whenever another question turned her my way. I felt light, unlatched, en route - the guest, the stranger, the carrier of stories. She hung on my words; she wanted everything.

Her gaze held, her smile overstayed. Sometimes her

hand came to rest on my knee; her fingertips drifted over my shoulders. Each touch sent a quick charge through me. My boundaries slid, breath by breath.

Her boyfriend said nothing, eyes tracking her like a shadow. She seemed unbothered. The air between them was thick - brooding, as if something almost, but not, happened. I tried to play it easy, to keep a little distance, while desire worked under my skin. Embarrassing. I was a guest - what was I thinking?

Then I remembered what I had on me - something to take the edge off: a bit of hash. With their okay I rolled a joint; the three of us smoked. The room softened. As if someone nudged the dimmer down and the evening lost its bite. Not long after, they turned in. I stayed on the couch.

By morning the pull had burned off, as if it had never been. We ate breakfast together. Then I headed out and wandered the city. Bruges lay quiet and old, almost medieval. The peace hovered for a moment, until the road took me back to highways and filling stations.

Strip Search

I headed for France. Late afternoon, someone dropped me at a sleepy border post out in the fields. A customs guard stepped out by the barrier and waved me inside.

Shit.

The hash sat in the coin pocket of my jeans, under the belt. My heart spiked. If they found it, France could go south fast. Had I been stupid?

'Empty your pockets. Bag on the counter. Everything.'

I kept groping for a plan. I nudged the pack his way - your turn, was the message. He refused. Not his job. He slid it back. A small standoff. that helped; his eyes stayed on the

bag. I unzipped it, slow, and laid everything out. My guitar was rolled in my sleeping bag; I pushed that over too, the same gesture: you open it. He refused again.

He flipped through the two books I always carried. The guitar he ignored. It stayed put. I turned out my pockets - left, then right. I saved the hash for last and let it slip, pinched between thumb and forefinger - silent, at my feet, tucked behind the counter's edge. He noticed nothing.

He took me to a back room. A doctor - or someone in a white coat - with plastic gloves. Trousers off, hand them to the guard. He turned the pockets inside out with a showy flourish and stared at me. Underwear down. I bent forward. The man in the coat took a quick look and nothing more. It still felt like straight-up humiliation. I got my trousers back. Everything 'in order.' Clean.

My things still lined up on the counter. Inside, I was seething.

The hash was still there. A speck on the mottled floor. I would take it, no matter what. I got 'careless' scooping up my stuff and 'accidentally' dropped my handkerchief right over it.

'Sorry,' I muttered.

I bent, picked them up together, and slid it into my pocket. I walked out without a word.

Relief - and a flicker of pride. I'd outfoxed the system. And then the questions arrived.

Who gets to force a random passer-by to submit to humiliation before he's allowed to go on? How deep am I tangled in a system I barely know? To smoke or not to smoke - who decides what I may do with my body? Was I in charge of myself?

Past the border post, anger still simmered. The shame clung to my skin; the questions kept grinding. Still, I'd made

it through. The scrap of hash was back in my pocket. I was a free man - for as long as that would last.

Speeder

Ahead, a twisting country road with white chevrons painted on the tarmac urged drivers to mind their lane. Thumb out, backpack and guitar strapped on, I walked. Somewhere far off, a rooster crowed.

A sleek Italian car braked beside me. The door flew open. A young Frenchman sat at the wheel.

'I'm Cédric,' he said.

I climbed in.

From the first moment he raced over the asphalt like someone with the police on his heels. We shot down the narrow lanes, the flatlands flicking past. The car growled, eager and precise. Now and then he dove into a blind corner on squealing tyres. I glanced over, nerves humming. He caught it, grinned, and said in a thick French accent: 'I'm a speeder.'

Oddly, that calmed me. He'd done this before. He knew his craft - or so I hoped.

Night fell. Headlights on; pace unchanged. In the wash of the dashboard I told him about the border search - right down to dropping my trousers.

'They are crazy,' he said, flicking his hand.

I laughed. His contempt for authority was unmistakable. My company. I boasted I'd tricked them, showed him the last scrap of hash. He shot me a smile.

'Let's make joint.'

'In the car?'

'Oui, oui. You stay at my place tonight. Pas de problème.'

It felt like a quiet pact, and I was happy to take it. Still, I

hesitated. Getting high in a roaring car? Probably not smart. But I didn't want to kill the mood. I figured I'd roll one, drag it out, go easy on the fill. We'd be there by then. We'd been driving a while.

No such luck. His village was still a way off. We smoked the joint and it hit hard right away. I was stoned out of my skull. Too much? Empty stomach? The speed? The nerves?

And him?

He must have been buzzing too - yet he drove like a front-runner in Formula 1.

The Scotland crash flashed back. My chest tightened. I asked him to slow down.

'Total control.'

He glanced at me and pressed harder. My breath hitched. All I could do was trust his hands.

Guardian angels were on duty; we made it.

We turned up a dirt track to an old farm, middle of nowhere. Cédric got out, swung a wrought-iron gate, and rolled into a courtyard boxed in by four buildings. The main house faced us like an old cloister: barred windows, weather-softened walls of thick brick. Even in the dark, it was idyllic.

'Is this all yours?' I asked.

'Oui.'

Inside, my jaw dropped. A split-level living room linked by a half-moon stone stair. A timber balustrade, fat beams overhead, red tiles underfoot, a pillar worked in carved wood. Everything spoke of craft and taste.

The kitchen ran straight into the room - wood, stone, wrought iron; nothing prefab. A sturdy wood-burner stood against the brick.

'What a house,' I murmured.

Proud, Cédric told me he'd bought the place for next to

nothing. It had been a wreck. He and his father, a furniture maker, had spent five years rebuilding it. Not finished, but the rest he'd do himself.

A drum kit stood there. And an electric guitar.

'Let's play,' he said.

Yes, please. The road-tension drained in that generous room. We lit another joint - my mistake. I got too high again. I couldn't even tune the guitar; every double stop scrambled overtones and fundamentals. Maddening. I kept at it. I wanted to play. Eventually it clicked. We drifted into some jazz. Cédric was a joy on drums - tight, swinging, sensitive. He opened wine; tired as I was, the night stretched on.

Two Well-Mannered Gentlemen

Next morning Cédric let me out by the highway to Paris. We shook hands hard. His eyes still carried the spark of a night of music, hash, and wine.

The sun was low over the tarmac when I put my thumb out again. The run into Paris was uneventful - no more speed demons, no joint in a howling car. Fine by me. My head needed quiet.

It had been years since my first run at the City of Light. I'd been back a dozen times, never long, usually a few days. I wasn't planning to stay now either. Paris was a waypoint.

Or so I thought.

Roughly a hundred kilometers out, two middle-aged men picked me up. The car smelled of leather and after-shave, its interior spacious, classic, and immaculate. The men were friendly and polite, with that restrained courtesy of people used to moving in better circles. Their English was impressively smooth.

We hit a long snarl on the ring road. The crawl made me

heavy-eyed; last night with Cédric was catching up. One of them noticed and suggested I come home with them to rest. I said yes.

Once the jam cleared we took broad avenues past suburbs of flats and office blocks, then rolled into a modern estate - clean lines, boxy cubes.

We stopped at a large, luxurious house on a hill, a wall of glass opening over the city. Far off, the Eiffel Tower needled through the mist. *They must have money*, I thought.

Inside, everything lay exactly in its place, clean and undisturbed. No clutter, nothing out of place. We drank tea at a marble table. One man talked about his architecture practice and clients from around the world. The other hung back - polite smile, few words.

Calm on the surface, but something else ran underneath. A fine, unmistakable charge - maybe sexual. I felt eyes on me: not hostile, a touch too intent.

Maybe I imagined it. Maybe not.

When they offered me a bed for the night I was tired enough to accept, but my instincts said no. The hospitality felt too generous, too fast - as if more was meant than said. I declined - pleasant, but firm. They took it without protest. One of them walked me through the route to the nearest metro, an elevated line with trains every few minutes, all heading into the centre. Perfect. Simple, clear.

Outside, cool air and a hint of rain. Relief, with a sliver of guilt.

The Invitation

In the metro, I drifted off, absorbed by the urban landscape passing by. In my peripheral vision I caught a girl sketching - a portrait of me, I realised. There was something gentle

about her. I meant to speak, but when I shifted in her direction she stood, gathered herself, and slipped into the next carriage. No portrait, no girl. *If only I'd waited a beat.*

I'd never played music in Paris. I ought to try.

I got off at Pont Neuf and wandered the streets, scouting for a decent pitch. But everywhere it was too noisy.

Along the café terraces I saw a woman with a guitar working the row of tables. A washed-out, slightly too large coat hung from her shoulders; her hair was tied back in a careless knot; her face was carved sharp by fatigue - and a hint of grim resolve. She sang one song, walked the cup past the tables, and moved on. No eye contact, no smile. Shy, hurried. As if she would rather not be there.

She carried the weather of someone often and deeply disappointed, hope worn down to the wick. A person who no longer expected anything from anyone. No mercy here, not in this big city.

It struck me hard - that sealed-off solitude, the loneliness plain in her eyes and in the way she moved. I recognised it. Was I looking at the end point of a road I was already far along? Was that my future?

With her image still clear, I headed back underground. My turn to play - find a quiet corner in a tunnel with forgiving acoustics. I should have thought of it earlier; now I had to buy another ticket.

A knot of kids vaulted the turnstiles, but with a backpack and a guitar that wasn't an option. I finally set up in a long passageway. After about an hour I'd made enough to catch a train out of Paris - far enough to start hitching again. I was packing up when an English voice beside me said he'd heard me playing. A Frenchman, roughly my age. He asked if I'd do a few songs at a party that evening. His name was Clémence.

Clémence

No wariness this time. He was disarming - open, jovial, a hint of mischief. A mop of curls, round cheeks, a button nose: the face that makes you smile. I relaxed around him at once.

We rode the metro out to his place in the suburbs. He shared with a roommate; I could crash there. Food and drink sorted.

We rode the escalator down to the Tube. Every time, I marvelled at how far below some lines lay. Imagine the work it took-hand-dug, like the peatland canals back home. And the care in the station design-artful, full of character, shaped with love. Even without any grasp of styles or schools, the workmanship was unmistakable.

Rush hour was rolling in. Packed trains. We stood until space opened up a few stops later. We talked about everything. He was taking an English class and happy for the practice. Now and then a word was missing, but we understood each other effortlessly.

Further out, I noticed most of the carriage was dark-skinned - heading for the banlieues. We didn't go that far; we got off midway.

Bright housing blocks - green, yellow, red - hundreds of flats in each. Between them: sports pitches, pocket parks with benches, play frames, even a skate park. Everything looked old and badly in need of renovation. Here and there kids hung around in the doorways; a few mothers with strollers sat silent under bare trees.

The lift was out. Seventh floor. Clémence cursed.

'Mostly the elderly and mothers suffer,' he said.

'Dangerous area?'

'Ça va,' - a shrug. 'With so many on top of each other, things happen; mostly it's quiet.'

His housemate was already home. A different type: calmer, a bit intellectual, but friendly. He had lived in London. We shared experiences. The fact that I was a street musician appealed to him.

He didn't make music himself, but he was an avid listener. In London, like me, he often went to gigs, with a preference for African bands. And in Paris too - something of a mecca for African music - he regularly attended concerts.

I felt welcome with these guys. Easygoing, relaxed - in a Parisian suburb. Who would have thought?

The Party

That night was Clémence's birthday. Twenty people - friends, dates. Warm, loose, well-mannered. Later it was my turn.

I was given a special introduction, and Clémence explained how and where he had found me. In French, of course, of which I understood very little. What was clear was that he was really playing it up, turning me into a special artist and presenting it as a gift that I had come to play here. I felt uneasy about the expectations he was creating, but I also found it amusing. It wasn't all that serious. The wine and conversations with the guests helped.

The stereo was turned off, I picked up my guitar and began. When I started playing, they spontaneously sat down on the floor. I hadn't expected that. It felt respectful. Their attention gave me exactly the confidence I needed.

My evening was made.

The Turn

I stayed on for a few more days. Clémence drove an ancient Renault 4 and we tore around the city. He wanted to show me everything - and for him it was the perfect excuse to speak English all day.

The car was a relic. Every corner set it squeaking and groaning; the body was a patchwork of dents and rust, and in places the paint was gone altogether. Through a hole in the floor you could watch the asphalt stream by under your feet. Starting it meant fiddling with a tangle of wires by the engine - the hood didn't even need opening; it wasn't there anymore.

I'd already noticed that Parisian cars are rarely dent-free, but this one beat them all. Clémence tried to keep out of the police's way. If they stopped him, it would be over on the spot. It felt like only a matter of time before they clocked him. Until then, he kept driving stubbornly.

On the third day he wanted to score weed or hash. We crisscrossed the city to friends and acquaintances, but nobody had anything. The little bit I'd had was gone with Cédric. Clémence grew impatient; the cheerful fizz drained out of him, replaced by clipped sentences and quiet patches. I couldn't grasp how a world city could be dry. In the Netherlands that would be no problem at all.

We ended up at a friend of his. No hash - heroin. I held back; that wasn't my world. Clémence felt otherwise. He'd used for a while in India, he said - years ago - but he was open to it again. I tried to talk him round. We'd find weed; there was no need for this. He said he'd only snort. As if that changed anything. When he still took some home, I knew we were in trouble. Something in the air shifted - distance, a wall rising. It felt like I was already losing him.

Back at the flat it didn't take long. He snorted. I watched him change in front of me. The merry show-off folded into a timid, uncertain boy with nothing radiating from him anymore. The fun we'd shared collapsed into a faint after-image, as if years had slid by in a minute. It made me heartsore.

This wasn't going to right itself. I said goodbye that same day. I couldn't watch it.

I wanted to leave Paris. To leave Clémence. To leave the disappointment.

Bamboo Saxophones

From Gare de Lyon I headed south, as if speed and distance could stitch the hole in me. The city thinned behind me, a cold dream dissolving. Target: the Route du Soleil, the road to the Med. I jumped off at one of the first stops past Paris, scrawled 'Lyon' on my sign, and soon enough I was moving the right way.

Night fell. And the cold with it. Highways run all night if you let them. At service areas you can ask drivers straight up; plenty of truckers run nights to make dawn drops. One of them took me aboard.

We'd barely merged when he cracked a beer from the cooler - then another, then another. The empties sailed out the window. My stomach tightened.

'Want one?' he asked.

I shook my head, not at ease. I told myself this was routine for him, a route he could drive on muscle memory. What could go wrong? But he shifted as the cans emptied. With each swallow he got chattier - louder too. A torrent of machine-gun French. I caught none of it.

That irked him. His tone hardened; glances got sharp,

gestures sharper. He'd had enough of me - that much I felt. The cab's air thickened with alcohol and strain. I wanted out. He did too, apparently; at the next service area he rolled to a stop and let me out. No words.

Relief.

It was deep night. I was dog-tired. Sleeping was out - too cold, too wet, no shelter. I tried to hitch; nothing. Drizzle found the back of my neck.

My mind slid back to Clémence. How was he? Why go back to it? If we'd found weed or hash, none of this. Now he was on the hard stuff. What future did he have? A one-off slip - or twenty years from now a broken man, bad teeth, worn face, chasing the next shot? The worst scenario stuck and wouldn't let go.

A big van pulled up. German plates - KS, Kassel.

Give it a try.

A man of about thirty looked up when I addressed him in German. He seemed surprised.

'Heading south?' I asked.

'Even as far as Italy.' he said.

He looked me up and down.

'Musiker?'

'Yeah. Street musician.'

He clicked the nozzle back, gave a quick smile, and waved me in. I climbed aboard.

'Danke.'

We drove through a strip of headlight and nothing else: tarmac, guardrail, the odd tree. He was Mattias, hauling bamboo saxophones. I had never heard of it, let alone seen one.

A simple, clever idea: a bamboo flute with a sax mouth-piece and reed - recorder feel, saxophone sound. He handed me one.

'Go on - blow.'

I did. And there it was: a sax.

He'd picked up the idea travelling in Asia, where they're common - cheap, simple, effective. In Europe, almost no one knew them. He saw his opening. He'd built them himself at first, but demand grew; now a factory in China made them. The van was stacked with crates. Distribution was on him: shops across Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy.

Paris was done. Lyon next, then Italy - Genoa, Florence. On the way back: Milan, Zurich.

'This run won't pay much,' he said.

'It's promotion - testing the waters.'

I said I was wrecked and asked if I could stretch out. No problem. He slept in the van too; a mattress lay between the crates.

'Lie down,' he said.

'I'll keep driving. Nights are easy. Slept in the day.'

I drifted off. When I woke we were in Lyon. Early - half five - but the shopkeeper was already there. While Mattias unloaded, I breathed the cold that cleared my head.

'Let's get out before traffic erupts,' he said.

I had no plan yet. Italy was a blank. Why not go? We hit it off, and Mattias liked the company. I offered to take a spell at the wheel if he got tired. He hesitated, then nodded.

'On the motorway it's straight,' he said. 'That should work.'

So I drove while he slept on the mattress among the bamboo saxes. At the Italian border he took over again.

By evening we rolled into Florence. We said our goodbyes. He turned the van toward Germany. I walked into the city to play.

There was a warm sheen over the streets. The smell of frying drifted from the restaurants I walked past. Out on the

terraces, cups clicked into saucers, plates came down with a soft clatter, corks popped cleanly from wine bottles. Smart young waitresses in black and white slipped through the maze of tables, skirting outstretched legs and bags on the ground. They laughed, took orders, leaned in to add a line or make a joke. From a side alley a scooter blared and shoudered its way through the crowd. I crossed a square, stepped into a pedestrian street, unpacked my gear, and started to play.

Between verses I let the harmonica wander. Long solos meant I could stretch a song as far as it would go. I needed that trick; no matter how big your set is, if you play it every day, it starts to grate. Improvising kept things alive - something new each time, testing where the edge was, giving myself permission to take it.

The price was hardware. Harmonicas die fast when you lean on them like that, and they aren't cheap.

After two hours of playing, the street was empty. Time to pack up. I counted the money and was shocked by the amount. So much! Was this normal in Italy? Or was Florence an exception?

Further South

The next days settled into a rhythm - cities, small towns, streets that felt awake. It wasn't a one-off: Italians love music, love art, love the act of expression. I'd never seen passers-by give so freely, so often. I followed the west coast down, town to town, village to village. The air tasted of the sea and raw fish. Fishing boats bobbed offshore, nets in loose heaps on deck.

Toward evening, the sun sank into the smooth water.

The light turned façades to gold; half-closed shutters seemed to hold the last of the day.

Beyond the city limits the noise fell away; exhaust gave over to air that felt fresh and clean. Church bells carried from a distance; somewhere a dog barked once and stopped.

At night I found shelter in abandoned houses, in the countryside or on the edge of a city. I usually stayed only a day, though I hung around a bit longer in Rome and Naples. I took trains between stretches; with what I was earning, and the low long-distance fares, it was easy enough.

Uninvited Guest

I went all the way down to Reggio Calabria. The first night I crashed in an empty shed by the beach. Bad call. I'd stuffed bread and cheese in a plastic bag and pushed it to the bottom of my sleeping bag - leave it beside you and the animals find it.

In the small hours something tickled my feet. I jolted awake and shot out of the bag in one move. Could've been a snake for all I knew. Outside, I turned the bag upside down and shook it. My food fell out - and a mouse. Small relief, but I was still annoyed.

I tried again: food back at the bottom, me back inside. Not long after - more tickle, a little gnawing. That did it. I shooed the creature off, grabbed the plastic bag, and flung the contents out onto the sand. A waste of good cheese, but at least I could sleep.

After that I moved into one of the beach huts that lined the shore in long rows, all empty out of season. Simple, sheltered, and - best of all - no mice.

Pierre and the Mafia

In town I got to know Pierre, a Frenchman running a small crêperie. He asked me to come and play a few songs one night - pass the hat afterwards, that was the plan. The crowd was mostly young. I wasn't sure my set would land, but Pierre waved it off: 'A bit of distraction is all they want.'

I did three songs. Each time the place blew up-whoops, shouting. I couldn't tell if it was real enthusiasm or just teenage noise. I felt, unintentionally, more clown than musician. You want people to really listen, to value what you bring. Here, I wasn't convinced. The money in the hat was thin too - maybe they simply didn't have much. Pierre didn't care; he just wanted buzz. On that front, job done.

Later he invited me over to his place outside the city for a night. Not an ordinary house; it was a full-fledged villa. Land was cheap here, he said, and he'd made the most of it - bought a traditional Italian farmhouse with a patch of ground for a fair price.

We sat on the terrace. Pierre told his story. France had wrung him dry: health issues, stress, a divorce. For years he'd run several outlets, doing well - until cheap competitors arrived and his shops toppled one after another. He hit the wall, lost his wife and kids, and was left with towering debts.

'I seriously thought about ending it,' he said.

'I felt worthless. Not a man. A man provides for his family-right?'

Then the tide turned. On holiday in this part of Italy he met someone new. The clouds lifted, slowly. Now he lived in this villa with his Italian wife and two small children. The debts in France were cleared; he'd rebuilt contact with his

children from his first marriage. They came over now and then, mostly in winter.

Old habits die hard. He'd opened another crêperie.

'It's the only trade I know,' he said. 'It's where I feel at home.'

I asked about the mafia-whether they showed up here too.

'I pay,' he said, as if discussing the weather.

'You can't avoid it. If you don't, they torch the place."

It barely seemed to faze him. He took it as part of the deal.

'Do you still feel free if you're paying criminals?' I asked.

'It's the only way to keep a business going here. And I can afford it.'

His matter-of-factness unsettled me. A society where this is normal - where you bow to crooks just to be allowed to exist - what's left of honour or dignity? How can a community accept that, day in, day out?

'This can't be the bedrock of anything lasting,' I thought.

He added that if you wanted the police to act, you paid them too - otherwise, nothing happened.

I asked about the cheap brand-name cigarettes being sold openly on the street.

'How does that work? It's smuggled-how can it be out in the open?'

'Pay and anything goes. The big boys bribe the police, and the sellers are left alone. That's how it runs here.'

A big corrupt machine - and everyone oiled it.

I struggled to process it. What did it say about people here? About their outlook?

Or did they think it made no odds whether the dog or the cat bit you? Was trust in the state so low they preferred to handle things themselves? I didn't know.

It must be a way of life people had made their peace with. Otherwise they'd revolt.

Either way, it felt off. Sour.

I needed to sit with it.

Next day we headed back to the city together.

We parted without making plans.

His cool acceptance of a world where corruption is normal kept echoing. I wondered what others thought - and whether, on the road, I'd meet someone who saw it differently.

Between Civilization and Instinct

Down south the money from music came in thinner than up north. It felt like Spain: modest take, yet somehow enough. I didn't lose sleep over it.

There was one other busker in town - a Welshman named Derek. Same pitch every day: the bank entrance, a guitar on his lap, a box of wine at his feet. I liked him at once. He had that settled, far-gone look of someone who'd written life off a while back.

Sixties, I guessed. He seemed to have made his peace with the waiting - do what you can to keep it comfortable until the curtain falls.

How he'd arrived here I never learned. We didn't go there. Not my business. Some days we sat a long time in companionable silence. On others he talked. He'd drift to South America, where he'd worked for years, and to his time in the army. 'Special missions,' he'd say - the operations that never make the papers. He steered clear of private matters. Still, you could tell he'd seen his share. He lived alone - no wife, no kids - and had no regrets. Fatherhood, he said, wasn't for him.

Derek saw through people with a dry, neat blade. He carved up daily life and poked holes in whatever passed for common sense. Good and evil, he liked to say, swap places as easily as a clean pair of shorts when interests demand it. The official truth? Sold to the highest bidder.

Rulers preaching morality while playing at benevolence - he called it theatre with bad actors. Nothing beyond that.

Words like civilization, conscience, humanity - useful only while the sun is out and the fridge is full. In hunger, fear, or war, your real self walks in. That's when the masks hit the floor.

One afternoon, when I went to see him, he was in a talkative mood. It seemed to do him good to sort out his thoughts aloud, and I listened with pleasure.

'We are not moral beings,' he said." 'Morality is paint on rotten wood - pretty at a distance, brittle in the first rain. And when the rain comes, you see what we are: animals with good memories and no conscience.'

He raised his shoulders, tapped the ash from his cigarette, and looked up at the sky. A short laugh, as if he knew he was laying it on thick.

'That's how it is.'

He took a drink from the box.

'All right, let me put it another way.' He lifted his chin.

'There's no guilt and no redemption. People do what they do - because they can. Full stop. If there's a God, He turned away long ago. Or He's laughing himself silly.'

His index finger traced the seam of the carton; a crooked smile.

'One more thing. You won't change people. That's why you watch out for idealists. They're more dangerous than cynics. Idealists believe in something, and for that belief they'll kill. Cynics at least leave you be.'

He felt most at home on the margins of society, where the façade was already cracked.

'The real truth lives on the street. Where people have nothing left to lose. That's where it gets interesting. That's where you see who someone is.'

That line I could meet him on. Still, I kept wondering whether his words always lined up with who he was. There was a softness in his eyes: a tired kindness, a deeper care. The worldview he'd built seemed mostly a shield, a place to hide. No expectations, so no disappointment. Perhaps he had once loved the world too much - and could no longer afford to.

There was a security guard beside us at the bank every day, an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder. On the glass door was a small icon - a handgun crossed out in red. I'd never seen a sign like that. Isn't going into a bank unarmed supposed to be a given? It felt like the Wild West. I turned to Derek and asked what It was about.

'Plenty of folks carry pistols here,' he said, deadpan.

'You want to go inside, you hand yours over.'

'You mean... legal? People can walk around armed?'

He laughed out loud.

'Legal? Everything's legal here - as long as you grease the wheels.'

Apparently I still didn't get it.

Sicily

I stayed in Reggio for a couple of weeks, busked, soaked up the mild weather. Then the pull to move returned. I caught the ferry to Sicily - Italy's largest island - and after a short crossing walked ashore at Messina.

With Christmas coming on, the sky was a clean blue. I

strolled from the quay into the dressed-up streets, toward the old centre. The ferry's low hum faded behind me. Luminarie stretched over the squares. Shop windows stacked panettone and torrone into little towers; in a bar a small TV showed a football match. Someone slipped a gettone into the phone. An old Fiat Panda rattled past.

Clémence came back to me. How was he now? We'd never see each other again - like so many I met along the way. Everything was temporary. Brief. A touch worth keeping, a moment to revisit - and then gone. No friendships that lasted, no relationships that outlived the season. I'd grown used to that, and it suited me. For now. One day I still hoped to build something - with someone, with a few. But deep down I felt the connection with others sliding away. Slowly, over years. As if real friendship or love had never had my name on it.

I must have been living with that prospect without admitting it. I attached less. Expected less. In the end they would let me drop. *I'm not good enough* - that line sat deep. A quiet fight for recognition I knew I'd lose. So I turned to God. If He made me, I could trust He meant me well. I held on to that. And still it was a fight. Could I trust God? Was there a God at all, did love exist? I believed yes.

Sfortunato

Near Piazza del Duomo I met Rashid, a North African flower seller, leaning against the wall of a big building. We cobbled together a conversation - some Italian, some French, some English, and a lot of hands. Business was bad, he said. It wasn't him; the other flower men were struggling too.

I proposed making some music - might attract

customers. He liked the idea. I took out the guitar, opened the case on the pavement, and started. Rashid stood beside me, bouquet pressed to his chest, a bucket of spare stems at his feet.

It didn't land the way we'd hoped. To passers-by there was no obvious link between a busker and a guy with flowers. We were side by side, but each in his own lane. No joint act. No natural pull. So nothing changed.

We still had a good time. Rashid was a bright spirit. He enjoyed the music.

'Sfortunato,' he said out of nowhere.

With my voice I should be on radio or TV, he thought - and here I was on the street. In his eyes, I lacked luck.

I laughed. People like to think music leads straight to success. One song and the world falls in line. In theory. In practice, only very few people manage to make a living from it.

In that sense I counted myself among the lucky few. Music paid my way. It let me travel and collect stories. What more was I after? I tried to explain, but Rashid's dreams ran another direction. Life on the street didn't figure in them.

Our plan fizzled. No reason to stay. Rashid took my hand in both of his, shook it hard a couple of times, and wished me every success. I headed for the station and took the train to Catania.

The Scooters

From the first minutes the city felt charged - young, restless, on the move. Scooters, bravado, easy manners: freedom and recklessness had found each other here.

In Italy the scooter is near-sacred. For teenagers it's the first real door that opens. At sixteen you can ride, and

suddenly the map is yours. In every town I'd passed, kids shot through the alleys - alone or with a friend hanging on behind.

Catania was another level. The two-stroke buzz filled the narrow streets like an endless refrain. As if a swarm of wasps were moving through the city. Helmets pushed back, cigarettes at the lip, one hand loose on the bars, the other cutting the air at friends. Boys in shades long after dark; girls on the pillion, hair streaming in the exhaust wash.

I'd never seen so many young people on two wheels. Was there something up-a graduation party, or the like? Everywhere, they were flocking together. Mopeds parked in circles like horses at a campfire. Laughing, shouting, smoking. And as quickly as they formed, they were gone again.

Meanwhile the terraces were busy with food and drink. It was evening. I sang a few songs, passed the cup, moved to another spot and did it again. After a while I'd had enough. I didn't feel like looking for a bed, so I took the night train to Palermo. I could sleep on the way.

Mafia Tactics

Next day brought rain - cold, mean weather. The city felt emptied out. Sunday. Shutters down, shops closed. I drifted for a bit and knew soon enough there was nothing for me here.

'Back to the mainland, then,' I told myself.

Near the station I passed a monument - looked to be anti-mafia. I asked a passerby what it stood for.

'Exactly what you think,' he said.

'And who put it here?'

He looked at me with a vague little smile.

'Probably the mafia themselves.'

I rode the train to Messina and by evening I was back in Reggio. The next day I pushed on to Bari on the Adriatic.

'There'll be life there.'

That afternoon, the weather cleared up. As the train approached the city and ran along a steep cliff, I looked out the window. About ten meters below me, in full sunlight, I saw a group of young people - fifteen, sixteen at most - handling hypodermic needles. They seemed to be helping each other inject. A sight that hit me hard. I wondered what possessed them to be doing this at such an age. What was going on here?

The lively city I'd hoped for wasn't there. Bari felt emptied out. Was it the season? Christmas lights strung up, hardly a soul on the streets. In a park where there were a few people about, I took out my guitar and started to play. Nothing. No response, no curiosity. I kept going anyway - something had to give, right?

After a while a man in his early thirties came over. Bari wasn't the place for this, he said.

'They don't appreciate that here. You'd be better off going to Rome. They value it more there.'

He sounded genuine, and his was a voice to heed. Message received. His English was passable, so we talked a bit longer. I told him what I'd seen from the train.

He nodded, face set.

'Drugs are a big problem here,' he said.

'The mafia runs the trade. First they seeded hash among the kids for a while, then stopped overnight. After that it was heroin only. That's all you could get. A lot of them got hooked.'

Judging by his face and general air, he looked as if he might have fallen victim to it himself. He admitted that was indeed the case.

I caught myself thinking: how far do you have to fall to wreck young lives on purpose, for money? There seems to be no limit to what we'll do to each other.

But the longer about it, the more I felt: this *is* our freedom. As human beings we are allowed to choose. For the good, but also for the bad. *What would that freedom be worth if we couldn't also be the worst devil?*

Rome

Bari gave me nothing to hold on to. Rome felt like a place where my music might land. I took the young man's advice and rode the train to the capital. By evening I stepped out at the main station. A crowd of users clustered by the front doors. I'd come through here before, on my way south - back then it was quiet. They were handing things out now: methadone, clean needles, food. Whatever It was, the sight hit hard - so many beautiful souls, trapped in their own shadow.

Heading for the centre felt as if I were walking through an open-air museum: ruins everywhere, shards of former grandeur. The city radiated spaciousness, history, and transience. Traffic thundered past, yet Rome kept its poise. Fountains kept up their murmur; bells rolled over the roofs. From small bars drifted the scent of espresso and roasted chestnuts; men drank standing.

First order of business: a place to sleep. Last time I'd crashed outdoors in a park with ruins; now I couldn't find it for the life of me.

To orient myself I did what I usually did: look up the buskers. They know the trade. In Rome that's easy - there are players everywhere. The metro is their home turf: long tunnels, perfect echo, pitches at the entrances. And because

Rome pulls in half the world, musicians show up from everywhere. That's when the competition gets tight; I'd learned that the hard way.

Not every busker here slept rough. Some were working musicians staying with family or in their own apartments, making a bit on the side. The standard was high - classically trained instrumentalists, jazz groups, choirs, singers of old Italian songs. And painters, scattered across the squares, turning ruins, façades, and café terraces - stately waiters and well-dressed patrons - into pictures. In this city, art seemed to have spilled into everything.

Ahmed

The people I was after lived like I did: day to day, on the road, drifting. That's how I crossed paths with Ahmed, an Algerian raised in Paris. We hit it off immediately. His English was solid; he carried himself with a calm, open maturity. Serious, clear about what he wanted. He was a few years older than me, a fine guitarist with a deep love for Jimi Hendrix. Where I knew only a handful of tunes, he had an entire acoustic Hendrix repertoire at his fingertips. He played with real feeling, and people on the street noticed - they stopped, they listened.

Ahmed was a practising Muslim. Unlike his idol, he steered clear of alcohol and drugs. I respected that: someone who lived his beliefs. It made me look at myself. All my talk of love and God - what did I do with it? How did I ground it? My own search was mostly about trust: trying to firm up my faith and to do right by other people. Even that was no small thing. I saw the same struggle in Ahmed, and that's why we connected so quickly.

He had a place where I could sleep. After we finished

playing, we took the metro out to a park on the edge of town. There he took care of a group of young North African boys, all of them street kids. In the park stood a low building with a flat roof you could climb onto. That's where they slept together. It gave them a bit of cover, and the police rarely came by - so long as you kept it quiet. Technically, spending the night in the park was against the rules.

When we arrived, a few boys were already up there. They brightened when they saw him - calling out, angling for his attention like kids do. He had authority without forcing it - ten years older than most, and his clean, principled way of living drew respect. That was what he gave them: direction and protection, someone who knew them and would pull them back when they started to drift - which, as I later saw, did happen now and then.

Ahmed himself did not sleep with them. Deeper in the park was an old horse track, long shut down. Beside it stood a raised announcer's box; someone had slipped him a key, and that's where he slept. A rug covered the floor, and the booth was fully enclosed - dry and out of the wind. He offered to share it; there was room for two. I didn't hesitate. I ended up spending the whole winter there with Ahmed.

Days were mild - about twenty degrees - but nights bit hard. Some mornings the grass and shrubs were filmed with frost. We didn't move in lockstep; each of us kept his own rhythm. Some days we only met again at night, back at our shelter. Ahmed had given me a key so I could come and go as I pleased.

Walking Through History

Finding a decent pitch was tricky at first. In the metro the prime spots were effectively spoken for. Buskers had their

own system - rotas that kicked off early. The moment one player packed up, the next slid in. Out on the streets it was often too loud to shape your own atmosphere.

Eventually I claimed a metro entrance beyond the centre. Italians are generous; there I made more than enough - enough even to put a little aside.

Riding the metro was practically free. The tickets used a magnetic strip that should have died after one trip, only it didn't. Sometimes you could squeeze three or four rides from the same ticket. I pocketed the throwaways people left behind and stitched Rome together with them.

I often took long walks through a city where time had settled in layers. Past ruins, squares, columns - millennia underfoot, the bedrock of the West. Everywhere, the wreckage of power. Pillars rose like exposed ribs from the flagstones; temples warped but still upright, refusing to vanish. Silent witnesses to an empire that once wrapped the world.

Drifting like that, I kept asking what had happened here. Have we changed since then? Of course. But at the core? I wasn't sure.

Has there been spiritual growth since Christianity took root here two thousand years ago? Did Christ's message ever truly take hold in people's hearts? As the priest in Samandağ said: '*Love God above all, and your neighbour as yourself.*'

You can't make it simpler. And yet, looking at the world, I had to admit: the message hadn't landed. Why?

Meanwhile modern life tore straight through the past. Scooters screamed by; cars shouldered into each other's lanes without warning. Road markings barely seemed to matter. Traffic here was feel, instinct - and a touch of luck.

In the centre of a boiling junction a traffic cop stood on a

concrete islet. Snow-white uniform, black sleeve tabs, a helmet-like cap. Whistle between his teeth. With smooth, almost balletic gestures he ran the whole show - pointing, rolling his hand like a conductor, punctuating orders with the whistle. He even spun a light pirouette before opening a lane. A solo performance in a haze of exhaust. Its own art.

In the evenings, the Spanish Steps drew buskers and drifters, along with the three terraces above them - often read as a nod to the Trinity (Trinità). We drank, played, told stories. Messy crowd, yes, but there was a thread of solidarity. Same boat. Now and then we were too loud and got told off; most of the time we kept it respectful. There were always a few too far gone into their private worlds to be steered. They were the exception.

When I went to Vatican City, the opulence took my breath and then turned my stomach. Wealth everywhere, not modesty or humility - nothing you'd expect from servants of Christ. I'd had my look soon enough.

St. Peter's Square churned with tour groups taking pictures, delighted to tick off a wonder. I felt out of step - almost ashamed not to share their joy. I crossed the Tiber, hungry for my people on the steps - unvarnished, no poses. That's where I belonged. Ahmed might be there too.

On the walk back I turned it over. The question of why Christ's plain message never sank in, maybe isn't so mysterious. Look at the treasure piled up and you see where the compass has pointed for two millennia - not toward love, but power. And Christ was clear enough: *you can't serve two masters.*

Willem

I reached the steps early. Only Willem sat there - a Dutch kid from The Hague. Addiction had pushed him into prostitution when he was young. The years had carved their marks; you could read them in his face.

In the Netherlands, his source of income slowly dried up, so he looked elsewhere. Rome suited him. The weather, the people, the city. Everything was better.

He still fought addiction, but methadone kept him steady. He got it free here.

'Much more relaxed,' he said.

He was the only Dutchman I'd run into in Rome. Usually we hardly spoke; that night, with the two of us, his life story poured out.

His mother was working the streets when he was born. He never knew his father. As a little boy he was 'lent out' to what she called '*uncles*' - men who wanted sex with him. He didn't know any different. Most were friendly, brought gifts, took him to the beach or an amusement park. What happened afterward apparently went with it.

He occasionally went with his mother to '*parties*.' A car would pick them up, and at times they drove for hours. There were other children there - boys and girls his age or younger. They were taken to a separate room, made up, hair done, dressed in 'special clothes.' Before they returned to the guests they were given a sweet drink that smoothed the fear away, almost euphoric. After that the guests - men and women alike, often in outlandish attire and speaking all manner of language - could do with them as they pleased.

'At first we were scared,' Willem said. 'But the drink took it away. It made it feel like everything was fine, even fun.'

And when it started to fade, we got pills. Then we could last the whole night.'

He swallowed, drew a breath, and continued.

'The next day we drove back. When I tried to remember, it was like a dream - only fragments stuck. The pain stayed, though. The marks on my body sometimes for days. I started to push back, but my mother pressed on. It paid the bills.

'Don't make a fuss,' she'd say.'

At some point he *aged out*. The '*uncles*' lost interest. Things got harder for his mother too. She'd been using for years. The day before his fifteenth birthday he found her dead in bed, needle still in her arm. Overdose. On purpose? No one knew. She was thirty-four.

'Not long after, I started using,' he said.

'I ended up on the street, earned my money with men, and almost twenty years later - here I am. I'm the age she was when she died.'

I had no words. If his story held, this was a boy raised in hell. Why? Why is one child born to silver, another to sludge?

I asked if he had ever considered life without drink or drugs.

'I've tried to quit a few times,' he said. 'It never sticks.'

Silence.

'I'll follow my mother. Strange as it sounds, there's comfort in that.'

'Aren't you angry with her? She wrecked your life.'

'No,' he said. 'I know what addiction does. Everything becomes permissible. Your moral compass disappears. You talk yourself into anything - no matter how awful.'

'Who were the people at those parties?'

'You can guess. Not Joes in flat caps. Always luxury - estates, villas, castles. Remote places.'

'Do you know names?'

'My mother did. She never told me. I understand why. Too dangerous. If I talked, we wouldn't be safe.'

'That bad?'

'That bad. Those networks are among the best-kept secrets of the rich and powerful. If they were exposed, the facade would shatter. The great shame would begin. They'll prevent that at all costs.'

'What drives them?' I asked. 'Why do such terrible things to children?'

He scratched his head, ran a hand through his greasy hair. A small cough. He glanced over the steps where more people had gathered. Then he met my eyes and nodded.

'Yes,' he said. 'That's the core. Why?'

'The rich and powerful think they can hold on only by feeding on energy from outside - sexual energy. Sex and power are two sides of the same coin - at least when love isn't part of it. The rush of an orgasm feels a lot like raw power. When the two overlap... they feel untouchable.'

'But why children?'

He swallowed; his eyes dropped.

'A child is innocence. If you can subdue something that pure, push it to the brink of death - or beyond - you touch absolute power. It means nothing can stop you. No limits, no conscience. Only will. In that instant they feel absolute freedom. As if they've stepped into another dimension, above everything. *They feel invincible - but it fades, so they chase it again and again.*'

He stopped. A chill ran across my back. It sounded insane - like something out of obscure books or films. And

yet the weight in his voice, the look in his eyes - everything said he knew.

I didn't want to believe it. Somewhere deep down, I did.

More and more familiar faces had joined us by then. The place filled with the murmur of talk and laughter. Ahmed was there too. As if he had sensed our mood, he picked up his guitar and played *Castles Made of Sand* by Jimi Hendrix. In moments like these all misery seemed to fall still. For a brief spell the world could wash its hands of guilt and bathe in the warm tones of an honest soul.

The last chords faded into the evening air. Still, the hush hung on for a moment, as if everyone sensed how rare it was.

Once the spell lifted, the grind returned.

After a while we gathered our things and walked to the Underground together. On the way Ahmed grew quieter. Something was on his lips. Only when we were seated did he tell me why.

Pickpockets

Some of his boys had been out lifting wallets again. They showed off the haul - full of pride - though they knew perfectly well he hated it. They even offered him a cut. Ahmed blew up.

'How do you expect the French or the Italians to respect you if you keep stealing from them?' he shouted.

'You drag your country, your culture, your faith through the mud.'

He did grasp how hard it is for kids like them - raised in France, stuck on the margins. But for him that wasn't an alibi.

'Crime is the easy road,' he said. '*Real men choose an*

honest life. That's where strength shows. The rest is weakness and cowardice.'

Ahmed straddled two worlds. He knew the West and North Africa from the inside. He believed every culture carries something worth keeping - otherwise it wouldn't last. Too often, that insight was missing.

'Resistance grows out of not understanding. Open up first - then you can begin to understand,' he said. 'Respect begins where curiosity replaces fear.'

He spoke, too, about Islamic mysticism - people living their faith a level deeper. That was the current he wanted to step into. In his view, whatever is truly good converges on a single, simple truth.

'The things we see and go through,' he said, 'are written in our hearts so that, in the end, we reach the same conclusion. Not through knowledge, but through faith in the good. And that is love - *Eternal Love.*'

Ahmed's words stayed with me. One simple truth for everyone. It felt good to realize that, each from a different background, we had arrived at the same core by different paths.

Healthy food

Spirit feeds you, yes - but the body needs fuel. Life on the road is hard on it; it chews through your reserves. You're always moving, always on guard: miles on foot, earning your keep each day; hunting for a safe place to sleep, for a little rest. Nights outdoors, often without real cover - sleep that never goes deep.

Staying healthy was non-negotiable. Food came first. I kept an eye on what I took in: wholegrain bread, cheese,

fish, garlic, olives, raw vegetables, fruit. No junk - my body paid for it too fast.

I rarely smoked or drank while I was roaming. Not only because it wore you down over time, but also because of the risks. Being buzzed in a city you don't know is asking for trouble - I'd learned that in Granada. In familiar surroundings it's different; on the street you're never fully safe.

Cooking wasn't an option. For a hot meal you could often turn to a mission kitchen. I didn't always go; the quality was hit-and-miss. You needed luck.

Rome had plenty of places where you could eat for free. One of the big ones was notably better than the rest. A large hall - over a hundred seats - where priests served alongside a few street boys.

Those boys were hand-picked, allowed to help prepare and serve - room provided in return.

They tended to pick the most handsome boys, and so the rumors kept circling about abuse. A boy I knew - strikingly good-looking - had been invited to work there. After a few days he walked away.

'It didn't feel right,' he said when we asked. He hadn't seen any priests crossing lines. Still - the doubt hung in the air.

Talent

Every now and then the road handed me something for the soul. In Rome it was a voice slicing clean through the metro tunnel - a young musician with the gift I'd glimpsed before: Finn in Stockholm, Alex in Montpellier, Flavio in Granada.

He sat on the floor of the tunnel, guitar across his lap, singing Beatles songs. The voice was so true it raised the

skin on your arms. A ring of listeners formed without anyone saying a word.

He couldn't have been more than eighteen - an English kid with soft blond fuzz, a baby face, clear blue eyes. He wore indifference like a coat, as if none of it touched him. Shirt half open, jeans worn thin, he slouched against the tiles.

The attention seemed to catch him off guard. Between songs he let the silence stretch, as though wishing the crowd away. No one budged. They waited. So did I.

People spoke to him, praised him, tried to meet his eye; he kept turning his head aside. The wait frayed nerves. Only when he struck up another tune did a soft breath run through the crowd. All the while the guitar case gathered coins and notes.

A man beside me said he was a film director.

'*Bellissimo*', he murmured when I asked what he thought of it.

He wanted the boy in a film. Whether it ever happened, I can't say. I never saw him again.

The memory of that boy - of that voice - came back a few times, then slowly filed itself away, into the drawer where other moments like it have gone to rest.

I, too, started taking my leave - of the Eternal City, of the friends of the steps. Winter yielded to colour and air, and the new season shifted Rome's feel: softer, yes, but something restless in my chest. Everywhere life nudged forward - buds popping in the trees, the park sweet with flowers, the first gelato carts flashing in the sun.

City of lovers

Spring had a charge to it. Days stretched; the light grew generous. Italy isn't called the land of love for nothing. In the park where I slept, the lawns on warm afternoons were littered with couples - folded into each other, whispering, stroking, kissing; for a while, nothing else existed.

I had never seen so much open tenderness, certainly not at that scale. Watching all those pairs held safe in each other's arms laid bare a lack I could no longer deny. I wanted home. Rest. Human warmth.

The idea of leaving had been circling for some time.

I talked it over with Ahmed. He'd worked for years in France as a courier for a friend and could step back into it. But Rome still suited him; for now he felt no pull to change.

He was the only one I said goodbye to.

On the way north I stayed a few days with Bädu, and then - without much ceremony - I went home.

FINAL JOURNEY

A QUEST FOR CONNECTION

Closing the chapter on the road

Back from Italy, I gave myself space to land. Rest, recharge - then move again. For years I believed I'd keep roaming. I knew nothing else that gave me as much fulfillment. I made no long-term plans. The street was the plan.

Yet the ending arrived sooner than I'd imagined. Two last trips: a summer run to Scandinavia, and later Greece by way of Italy. After that, it was done.

What used to be a playground of freedom and chance encounters had dulled. Same loop every day: play, eat, find a roof, sleep. I knew every beat of it. It stopped giving back.

The magic had leaked away. Adventure became habit. I'd mapped the edges of the vagrant's life and weathered its uncertainties. Survival wasn't a test anymore; it was labor. Another day at the office.

No great insight, no clean break. A quiet signal from deep within: enough.

The street had given me plenty - stories, friendships,

perspective, freedom. I would carry that with me. I had already passed thirty. It was time for something else.

What, exactly?

I didn't know yet — only that this chapter was over.

Amsterdam

Through a contact I found an affordable place in Amsterdam. On paper it was already rented, but the tenant - Herman - was hardly there, mostly staying with his girlfriend in Emmen. When we met he turned out warm and easygoing, mid-forties. He was fine with me using the flat in the meantime. Now and then he'd be back in town and we'd share. It worked. Good company.

Amsterdam had a pull. Young people poured in to study, work, or ditch the small-town squeeze. This was where things happened. This was where you could be yourself - or so I figured. It felt like the next step.

Life found a regular tempo. I cleaned for Alfa Hulp and picked up shifts at the Liftcentrale - a pre-platform rideshare outfit where you paid to catch a lift to a set destination, in or outside the country. The idea came from Germany, and the German owner also ran a travel agency out of the same office. Evenings and nights I still played on the street.

At first it was fun: exploring the city, soaking up new scenes. Then the isolation crept in. And the way people clocked my accent stung.

"Oh, you must be from the east," they'd say, in a tone that made it sound as if I'd come from Siberia, as if I didn't belong.

So much for Amsterdam's famed tolerance. You were expected to blend in. I didn't. I didn't want to go along and

give up my ownness. But the result was that I felt less and less at home.

Existential crisis

I slid back into a darkness I recognised - only this time it went further down.

People felt frosty, turned inward. No real bonds, quick meetings and filler talk. You could die in your apartment here and no one would notice. Vulnerability had no place in the modern order. There was no love, only interests: you something for me, I something for you. It went no further than that.

My view of society grew increasingly bleak. Everyone seemed to look away from what was real. We put up a screen so we wouldn't have to see anything. The media filled that void with a stream of one-sided stories about our prosperity, our supposed moral superiority, and the idea that we were always on the right side. Criticism was wiped away or dismissed as extremism. News was not a reflection of reality, but a carefully staged performance. Anything that didn't fit the script was simply erased.

Beyond our borders, the same double game: grins on trade junkets while we drained other countries' resources; peace on our lips, weapons in the cargo; public compassion, private backing for the perpetrators. We dressed it up as civilisation, as progress, as aid - but beneath those words lay greed, power, and self-interest.

We were fed comfort stories: we were reasonable, our leaders had things in hand, the trouble lived elsewhere. Conflicts were flattened into good versus evil, as if life were a fairy tale.

Behind the façade was a different world: loneliness,

bleak streets, hushed poverty, addictions, psychological distress.

It was all one big show — and we swallowed it like sweets.

Respect had gone - for citizens, for truth.

The country, the city, the system: suffocating on lies.

And I suffocated with it.

Grief. Helplessness. Alone.

My mind bogged down in its own mud. Each question bred more, until none of them meant anything. Despair got under my skin.

Once, travel cut through it. Music, drifting, chance encounters. But that well had run dry. No solace, no spark, no fresh horizon.

I stalled out. Nothing moved me. Everything turned flat; people blurred into background actors. I wanted warmth and real connection and found only chill and distance. Days looped. No future in sight. Not in Amsterdam, not in the Netherlands.

Then something snapped to clarity. I needed a break with the script. A clean jump. All or nothing.

It didn't arrive as an epiphany; it accumulated. A choice formed: not an escape, not a holiday - an entry into the unknown. Africa.

I wanted proof it could be different. That people still showed up for one another, that community wasn't a word. And if not, I was done.

'Show me what life is worth.'

No guitar. The bare essentials. I booked a rideshare through the Liftcentrale to southern Spain. With a thousand guilders and a Moroccan visa, I set off.

Toward the truth, or the end.

Reunion with Reme

I got off in Granada.

When I reached Sacromonte, Reme was still in the same cave. We were glad to see each other. She'd had a relationship in the meantime; that was over. I stayed a few days. When I told her about my plans, she hoped I'd drop by on the way back. I promised, though I wasn't even sure there would be a way back for me at all.

It was the last time I saw her.

Tangier

I thumbed rides along the coast, via Málaga, to Tarifa, and caught the ferry to Tangier. On the Spanish side they were inspecting everything - cars, trucks, foot passengers - smuggling hash out of Morocco was a known issue.

Tangier felt strangely looser on arrival. No checks, Moroccan men hovering for tourists, offering tours and cheap rooms. I turned them down politely, but one man trailed me with stubborn persistence. I tried to keep him at arm's length without being rude - my first day in his country, after all - but he wouldn't quit. When I asked what he wanted, he said it was dangerous to walk the city alone.

Was that a warning, or a threat? He named a ridiculous price to 'escort' me, counting on haggling. I didn't bite. Eventually he peeled off. Still, the point had landed: the seed of fear was planted. I moved through the city on high alert, scanning faces, reading the street. Little by little, it ebbed. The city slipped back into its everyday rhythm; people went about their business. The menace thinned into sunlight and scented alleys - though a thin film of caution remained.

Tangier wears a storied past. From 1923 to 1956 It was an

international zone where laws bent and morals blurred. A refuge for spies, smugglers and criminals - but also for writers, artists, and the aimless. Paul Bowles, Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Genet, Brion Gysin, Francis Bacon - each had holed up here for a while. I drifted through the medina, browsed the market, and sipped chai in a café.

It was September, summer still in full force. What struck me was how openly people smoked hash. Steel pipes passed from hand to hand after a single pull. No one seemed to care.

'Is this even legal?' I wondered.

Surely not. The Rif, where cannabis is grown, lies up the road. That might explain it.

Later I met a long-time expat. Hash, he said, is officially illegal, but here it's stitched into daily life. 'It's tolerated - until it isn't,' he told me. 'Tourists should be careful. If they catch you, someone will likely ask for a bribe. Refuse, and you're off to the station - what happens after that, who knows.'

It put me off. In that climate I had no desire to smoke. I didn't stay long. That same day I took the train to Rabat. In the carriage I was the only foreigner; eyes followed me from every side. The unease hadn't left; I stayed alert. I didn't dare sleep, afraid I'd wake to find my things gone.

Marrakesh

My worries turned out to be misplaced. The run to Rabat passed without a hitch, and the leg via Casablanca to Marrakesh was as smooth. I booked a cheap little hotel for a few days.

Sleeping rough didn't appeal. Luckily, prices here made that small luxury possible. A hotel room also meant: no

baggage for a while. Stepping into the city unburdened felt like release.

Marrakesh carried the legend of a 1960s hippie haven. Most of it felt like folklore now - whittled down to trinkets and tales for visitors. The city, one of the four imperial capitals, radiated something familiar in its Moorish architecture, stirring memories of Granada.

Everything seemed to move at once. Mopeds skimmed past carts stacked with oranges; donkeys under heavy loads plodded the narrow streets. The medina was a lattice of tight alleys where the sun only seeped in. Trade lived on every corner: copper and carpets, spices and shoes, fresh fruit, meat hanging in the open, water carriers in bright robes with copper urns. Haggling rose in loud waves.

Shopfronts spilled their wares almost to the middle of the lane. Handcarts muscled through; kids hawked rugs, trinkets, sodas in plastic bags. Restaurants and tea houses claimed sidewalks and squares. The air was a weave of dry heat and scent - mint, leather, charcoal, and the rich grease of frying.

On the main square by the bazaar I saw my first snake charmer. Light-blue robe, a turban, bare hands. One by one he lifted snakes from a wicker basket, coaxing them to sway and rise to the flute - as if he were borrowing their will. The crowd kept its distance without being told. Fear sits deep in the blood.

Monkeys shuffled on chains for photos, handled with a roughness that made you wince. Acrobats, storytellers, musicians drew tight rings of onlookers. The murmur turned hypnotic at night - a sound-carpet of voices, music, shouts, and the soft hiss of oil.

The bazaar was its own maze, a city inside the city. I

wandered, let colour, noise, and smell take the lead - spice, fat, sugar.

Chai was poured in a small park off the square. I joined a group of men beneath a tree, tried to edge into their talk, but eyes slid past me. When I realised I was paying five times their price for a glass of tea, I challenged the vendor. He wasn't impressed by my sense of justice. He shrugged: *prix touristique*.

On the square I ran into two lads around twenty. Banished from France for petty crime, they were gentle and unassuming. They showed me the city and asked nothing in return. I bought some hash from them and smoked it that evening in my room. Safe enough.

Here, everything was trade. Through their contacts my too-warm sleeping bag and sweaty trainers became a woollen Moroccan blanket and handmade sandals.

Gradually, I noticed that one of the two boys needed his daily ration of wine.

Not easy here. No shops sell it; you need connections - like with drugs - and it isn't cheap. He used opium too. Daylight kept it in cheque, but after dark he drifted through the streets, dulled, or sat silent on a step with his leather wineskin. His friend watched over him and kept the police at bay.

I struck out on my own, and we saw each other less and less.

Ouarzazate

After a week I traded crowded Marrakech for Ouarzazate. The bus was all plastic seats and sun-spotted curtains, a string of beads and a faded photo above the driver. The engine hummed, a chaâbi tape crackled, and the city

slipped behind us - palms, rose-pink walls, then an open plain stitched with olive groves.

After Aït Ourir the climb began: hairpin bends, boulders stacked like loaves, sandy villages, goats picking their way along the slopes. The bus groaned, dropped a gear, found its rhythm. Bodies leaned with the bends; a child slept slack-jawed. Windows cracked open; a thread of thyme-scented air found its way in. At every blind turn the driver tapped the horn - a quick 'coming through' thrown at the cliff.

At the crest of Tizi n'Tichka the light changed; downhill everything turned warm, terracotta. The slopes broke into terraces and dry gullies. Clay-coloured villages clung to the hillsides, pisé walls exactly the tone of the earth itself. Road-side tables showed saffron and honey; carpets snapped in the wind. The bus picked up speed and the roofload shifted with a scrape. The man next to me offered figs from a plastic box.

By late afternoon the shadows went long and needle-sharp. A rim of palms marked an oasis ahead, and the outline of a barracks. A sign: Ouarzazate - a city of mud and stone baked hard by the sun, with the High Atlas glittering behind it, snow sprinkled along the horizon.

We eased onto wider asphalt. To the right, Kasbah Taourirt stood like a sandcastle; to the left, a pointer to a film studio - a wink from the dream factory on the desert's edge.

The engine sighed to a stop. The door slammed; heat hit my face. People stretched, dusted themselves off, and wrestled bags down from the roof. Laughter and calling, a quick haggle with a taxi driver; someone hunting for a lost hat.

I found a cheap room and wandered out. Past sand-coloured houses and tight lanes I drifted toward the desert. A jeweler at a tiny stall drew me in. Watches? I shook my

head. No matter - he poured sweet chai and we talked, in a braid of French, English and Spanish. He spoke about how hard it is to get a life going here. Many young men see no future: no work, no money, no marriage - only the idea of Europe. While his gaze tugged north, mine pulled the other way. He wished me luck.

Beyond the last houses the town thinned into sand. A small roadside kitchen waited there. Outside, diners sat in the sand around a gentle, crackling fire, eating mostly in silence with the odd low phrase passing between them. Inside, no menu. I ordered blind, carried my plate back out, and folded into the sand.

The air was so clean each breath felt like a gift. What eased my lungs settled my stomach. Dinner came in an earthen tagine: simple - chickpeas, slow-softened vegetables, a fragrant warm sauce, a little meat. Nothing fancy - and exactly right.

Missing

Back at the hotel, the lobby posters reappeared - the ones I'd seen before: two Dutch boys missing. They had driven through Algeria and then vanished. It moved me especially because they came from my own country.

As I moved through Morocco, no one yet knew what had happened. There was still hope. Only months later did I hear what likely went wrong: somewhere in the Sahara the car failed. No help for miles. Walking on wasn't an option. When the water ran out, they supposedly set the car alight - a last signal for rescue - that never came.

What did they endure? I kept picturing what they might have tried in that blistering heat, and how their final hours passed. Did they fight to the last, or yield to the inevitable?

Western Sahara

Their situation kept running through my mind as I travelled on.

I didn't stick around in Ouarzazate. The next day I caught the bus to Laâyoune. The engine purred, the city receded - clay tones fading, the Anti-Atlas rising ahead.

Near Taznakht, rugs were pegged to the wind to dry. The road rose and fell, colors sliding from stone-red to ashen gray. People nodded off, heads rocking with the ruts. Now and then a checkpoint: a raised hand, a quick glance, the mime of a stamp, and on we went.

The land thinned out - shrubs at first, then only rock and sand. At one stop an old man climbed aboard, a bundle of date fronds under his arm. He nodded, sat beside me, and snapped one off to share.

Tata was a green ribbon in a stone basin: palms, a pump, three tagines on charcoal. We ate in silence from the same clay dish. The driver checked the water, tapped a tire, and whistled us back in. Then Akka: earthen houses, arcades pooled with shade, rows of dates strung on twine.

The afternoon stretched. Heat trembled on the tarmac; mirage swallowed the horizon. Guelmim called itself the gateway to the Sahara - you could feel it in the wind. Grittier, salt-tinged, as if the ocean had already hitched a ride. Between Tan-Tan and the coast, gulls sometimes appeared before the sea itself; and then, suddenly, a shard of blue at the eye's edge.

The bus fell quiet. Faces turned to the window: long shadows skating over empty flats that led nowhere and everywhere. At dusk the control posts surfaced, booms half-buried in sand; papers, a nod, onward.

Late that night Laâyoune burned like a ribbon of sodium light in the dark. We swung into the station yard.

We were in Western Sahara now - a contested strip, long patrolled and skirmished over. To Rabat, an unquestioned piece of the kingdom; to the people of the land, a promise of their own, with Polisario and Algeria at their back.

Travel here was by leave only. Once a day a convoy set off for Dakhla, halfway to Mauritania: buses, trucks, cars strung into a single file, soldiers front and rear. No swagger - just caution.

In Convoy

Before dawn we gathered on the dusty square by the gendarmerie. Buses, pickups, canvas-covered trucks - one long ribbon. Soldiers worked down the line, peering into beds, shutting doors with a flat slap.

'Convoy,' someone said.

A pickup with a flashing light up front, another at the rear. Briefing: crack your window, keep your distance, don't stop, don't leave the road.

The city still slept as we pulled out. Blue-grey light, cool air with a lick of salt. The engines settled into a single pulse; you could feel everyone syncing to it. We merged onto the N1 - an arrow through the void. I stared at shorelines that looked like paradise: glaring white beaches, sun-washed, endless, empty. No tourists, no villages. Only wind, sand, and the endless sea.

Boujdour was a breath taken. A rock, a lighthouse further on. We half-circled a tea stall: three small sweet glasses in a row, bread with omelette and cumin. The escort kept idling. A quick hand sign, everyone back in. The ribbon drew taut again.

By evening the road pinched the spit of land. Left, the lagoon in blue-green tones; right, the open Atlantic. The sky picked up a red-gold rim. Far ahead a string of lamps appeared: Dakhla. The beacon clicked off. Our bus eased its revs, as if it too exhaled.

At the station a man approached - hotel, good price. Higher than I was used to; I waved it off and walked on. He stuck with it, offered something cheaper. I was done haggling, but when he dropped to something fair, I let him lead the way.

That night I found a restaurant and asked about the road ahead. No more public transport went south. If you were bound for Mauritania, you had to fix it yourself. With that knowledge, I turned in.

Plump Women

I slept till noon. No rush. I drifted through the sandy streets, letting my eyes and ears pick up the day.

Beyond the city I stumbled on something unexpected: a group of fuller women lying on their sides in the sand, bright clothes, smooth round faces. They were there without apology; passersby-me included-paused to look. Their eyes were steady, almost challenging: *this is us.*

Curious, I asked a man what was happening. He said that here, flesh stands for beauty and status

'Girls are fattened from a young age,' he said.

'Fattened?'

He nodded.

'Yes. If a girl wants to be considered marriageable, she's expected to conform to a man's wishes. The heavier the woman, the more prestige for her husband. A bit like live-stock,' he added, without a flicker.

'It shows a man provides well for his wife-or wives-and his animals.'

I was taken aback, but bit my tongue. Crude as it sounded, was our Western fixation on thinness really better? We, too, press an ideal onto women.

Marriage Proposal

Later that day, a man around my age stopped me on the street. Would I meet his sister?

I was cautious at first, but he remained polite, asked nothing of me. She was struggling, he said. I could help. Curiosity edged out caution.

I went along with him. We stepped into a small room. A table in the centre; a shaft of light from a narrow window washed a mint-green wall. His sister sat opposite, headscarf on, bundled despite the heat. She barely met my eyes. Two older women waited, silent, in the shadows. It felt like a play I hadn't learned the lines to - until it clicked: they wanted me to marry her.

I'd heard versions of this on the road: women who, to escape a sense of hopelessness, sought out a foreigner to obtain papers. After that, each would go their own way.

Her brother put it gently, almost timidly. Not a transaction, a request for help. He wanted a chance for his sister, he said. I believed him. But it sat wrong. What would be asked of me later, in Europe.

What strings might be tied that I couldn't yet see?

I told him quietly I wouldn't do it.

'No problem,' he said. 'I understand.'

No pressure followed. I said goodbye, and stepped back into the street.

Walking toward the sea, the thought kept circling. Had I

turned down something that might have been real - an unexpected bond, even a woman I could have shared a life with? Another path, toward home and steadiness? A missed chance?

I had said no, and that choice meant something too.

It's fine, I told myself, hoping that would finally still my mind.

Winged Horse

Down by the coast I found a bench. I sat and looked out over beach and ocean, my thoughts still circling her. A handful of children played the same game children play everywhere: chasing the ebbing waves, then shrieking and sprinting away when the water chased them back.

A man eased onto the bench beside me. He was in rags, with a sour smell that suggested he hadn't washed in a long time. Small scabs freckled the skin beneath his salt-and-pepper stubble. His teeth were worn down to stumps, save for one reasonably intact canine. Dark, lank hair - shot with grey - clung to his thin skull. He fixed me with hollow eyes and told me he had worked in England. It felt good, he said, to speak English again.

I assumed he wanted money and asked him straight out.

'No,' he said, hands raised in a calming gesture.

'Relax. Just talking.'

He told me he'd once sailed the merchant routes, travelled the world, and read a lot. Camus topped the list. Later he came back to his country and joined the Polisario, the rebel force.

'The struggle goes on,' he said. 'But for me, it's over. I've seen too much. Endured too much.'

He ran a hand through his hair.

'The horrors of war - what we do to each other... no sane person can bear it.'

Only heroin kept him level. He'd been using it even while he fought with the Polisario. *Horse*, he called it.

'It was the horse that gave us wings. High above the clouds so we didn't have to look at the misery.'

Now the war had turned inward. Each day was another skirmish with his own demons. The ideal he once carried had thinned into cynicism.

'It's not about the people; it's about the loot. We fight for the rich, for the sponsors. Not for our people. This region is rich - you wouldn't know it to look at it - but they want the mineral wealth. The backers and de financiers are in it for profit. Always profit. And we get nothing.'

He pointed to a child flying a kite, its bright tail flicking in the wind.

'That was me once. Bound to my people, my ideal aloft. Then I let myself be seduced by weapons, and suddenly you have an enemy - who is your brother. You learn to hate because you must. Only then can you kill. And for that you need drugs. No one wins a war without them. They numb you. Make it easier. Until you wake up and see all the bullets were aimed at yourself. After that comes madness. And you're gone.'

He fell quiet, hunching forward, shaking his head.

'How do we keep letting ourselves be fooled?'

He held my gaze, waiting for an answer.

What could I say? That it always comes down to resources and the greed of the wealthy? I'd long believed as much. The rest is smoke - propaganda to sell war: stoke fear, point to an enemy who 'wants to destroy us,' call for defence of the fatherland. The same tired script, again and again.

The suffering of millions gets filed under 'collateral

damage.' And afterwards? Silence. Especially for men like him. The media moves on, outrage cools, and by the time the next crisis arrives, the playbook is ready.

Yes - why do we fall for it every time?

On the beach, mothers gathered their things and called their children, who followed reluctantly.

Soon after, we walked back toward the city together. As we passed a small restaurant I asked if he wanted to eat. He said his stomach couldn't handle much anymore. Soup, with a little bread - that he could manage. I ordered for us both. We sat beneath a pergola heavy with purple blooms. We spoke little. His story stayed with me long after we parted ways.

On to Mauritania

I headed for my hotel - done in after a long, intense day. I'd figure out later whether I could find someone to travel on with. First: rest and gather myself.

That evening I ran into a group of Flemish-speaking Belgians in town. They were driving a large 4x4 and a jeep on a desert run to Mauritania. Could I tag along? After a quick huddle they agreed: as far as the border. Good enough for me.

Before first light we formed up on the sand by the gendarmerie: two Toyota pickups, a sagging little lorry, jerrycans of diesel and water, coils of rope, planks for when the track went soft. Cold wind coming off the lagoon; sweet tea in small glasses, sugar crusting your lip. A man with a dog-eared notebook took down our names.

'We go together,' he said. 'No stopping. Keep to the tracks.'

They were an adventure club, used to remote country -

five in all: two women, three men. The club was larger, but with two vehicles you rotate. They liked their terrain rough. Everything was squared away: water, food, spare fuel, a mechanic for the inevitable. Even boxes of clothes and eyeglasses to give away. They had Mauritania visas. I didn't. Whether I'd get in was anyone's guess.

Dakhla dimmed behind us; the ocean kept its place as a long blue border to the left. The land flattened into hamada - stone and more stone, a stray scrub, lips of sand creeping across the track.

The engines held a single note.

In the back, on a bench beside Alain - a big, solid guy - I let the wind breathe through my mouth. We talked travel, hopes, Africa, Europe. I noticed how hard It was to speak about the purpose of my journey. Unreal, too far from me; it didn't fit the image I kept up of myself: the down-to-earth traveller. I wanted to get something off my chest, looked for support, some confirmation, but it wouldn't come. The words wouldn't cross my lips. This had to be lived, not explained.

The sun lifted. The air shattered into shivering mirage-sheets. Salt and dust, and far-off, a thin thread of fish on the wind. A single gull hung over emptiness.

By late day we hit the hard part: no-man's-land. No tarmac, only faint lines snaking through rock fields and baby dunes. *DANGER MINES* signs leaned crooked in the sand; here and there a car carcass, gutted and left. We drove precisely in one another's tracks, wheel for wheel, as if the ground itself were dictating. Silence held. The banging suspension and the dry ticking of gravel on the chassis.

Then a splash of colour: a Mauritanian flag dozing on a pole. No border shack. The convoy didn't slow. The world

barely shifted. At dusk, ship hulks rose like rusty ribs out of the loose sand.

Customs waited in Nouadhibou. We swung into a sandy yard; engines died in sequence. Checks began. The Belgians were waved on - their papers perfect.

I was told to stay.

At the Police Station

A customs man escorted me to the police station. Outside, in a small courtyard, I was told to sit on the ground beside an officer at a table heaped with forms and a telephone.

'Wait,' was all he said.

'How long?'

He shrugged.

By evening the shift changed. The new officer told me I'd be spending the night here. Tomorrow, we'd see. Meanwhile more people were brought in - not into cells, but out in the courtyard with us. Most had been picked up for alcohol, banned in strictly Islamic Mauritania. Some toppled over and slept as soon as they touched the ground. Two prostitutes arrived as well, shy and keeping to the edges.

I'd barely eaten all day and the hunger set in. In broken French I asked the officer if I could get something to eat.

'That's not our responsibility,' he said flatly. 'You have to arrange that yourself.'

'But I can't go anywhere.'

'Then wait till morning. When families bring food for other prisoners, you can ask to share.'

Not exactly comforting, but I had no choice.

And sure enough, next morning mothers, sisters, and fathers showed up with pots and plastic tubs of hot food. I

watched, hungry, not daring to ask - until a man I'd chatted with earlier beckoned.

'Come on, eat with us.'

There were no utensils; everyone ate with their hands. It looks simple, but it's a craft. Despite my clumsiness, I managed to eat my fill. I was grateful to him.

The day shift came on; the first officer from yesterday was back. By mid-afternoon he had news.

'I can't keep you here. You need to go to Nouakchott for a visa.'

First, though, I had to sign a statement. He'd pecked it out beside me on a rickety typewriter - French, and it took him hours. When I tried to read it, he snapped the paper from my hands.

'Don't read. sign.'

A prisoner next to me objected.

'He has to know what he's signing!'

The officer wouldn't have it. He handed the sheet back, and when I glanced at it again he warned, 'If you don't sign right now, you're staying.'

I decided to play it safe. I couldn't truly make sense of the French anyway. I signed, and they escorted me to the airport. I had to pay for the flight to Nouakchott myself - I wasn't even sure I had enough. As it turned out, I did. That same afternoon I had my visa.

Nouakchott

Finally free. one night, but it had felt like an age. I drifted into the city. Low-rise everywhere - three, four floors at most. Most houses were single-story: square blocks with flat roofs. Plain, functional.

Unlike Morocco, nobody hassled me here. No calls, no

grabbing. A relief. I weighed up finding a hotel or letting the day unfold. I chose the latter. The farther I walked from the centre, the paving gave way to sand; the lanes between houses were nothing but grit. That's where I ran into a young Black man - Camara, from Ghana. His English was good; something about him felt familiar, as if we shared a thread we hadn't named yet. He seemed strikingly Western, though he'd never left Africa. We talked, and he invited me to eat at his place.

He lived with his friend Ebo in a bare one-room house. No furniture, no mattresses, no blankets - just a rug on the floor.

'If you like, you can stay,' Camara said.

'I'd like that.'

Ebo wasn't home then, but Camara was sure he wouldn't mind. He didn't. That evening the three of us talked. Both wanted Europe, both were stuck in Mauritania.

They called it '*the coffin*' - once you're in, you never get out. Heading on to Morocco or Algeria wasn't possible. Even with fare in hand, they'd be turned back on the spot. Going back to Ghana wasn't an option either - everything they had was sunk into the trip here; nothing left for a return. Work was scarce to nonexistent. So they cut hair to survive - no training, no experience.

The next day they took me to their setup outside town. More men in the same bind were there - Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ivory Coast - all barbers.

They had marked out two-square-metre plots in the desert sand and framed them with posts and wooden partitions into makeshift booths. Tarps slung between the posts threw shade against the burning sun. That's how they set up an open-air barbershop with around ten little workstations.

When we arrived, the place hummed. Customers came

and went, and it doubled as a meeting point for young men bound by one dream: Europe, someday.

Some had been waiting here for years. The hope of Europe was wearing thin, though no one said it aloud.

Later a Mauritanian boy showed up. He had a couple of beers in his bag for himself and held them up, proud. A few whispered he'd just been released - five years in prison for alcohol.

Whether by chance or because he'd been watched, I can't say, but two policemen suddenly appeared. They walked straight to him, tore the bag open, and tapped the bottles without a word.

He unraveled. Prayed, begged, shouted. Windmilled his arms. The thought of another long sentence tipped him toward madness. He crumpled, sobbing.

The officers didn't bend. They took him under the arms and dragged him through the soft sand to the car.

Among our group the arguments started. Some called it absurd to arrest him over something so small. Others called it foolish - he knew what would happen, and still he walked the streets with beer.

Mostly, I felt sad. I pitied him. That a few bottles of beer could trigger such a drama - I struggled to believe it. That it could cost you your freedom felt far beyond the pale.

The episode wouldn't leave me. I felt less and less at ease in this country. The way people were treated began to bother me.

Apart from that, there was little to do in the city, and even less in the evenings. Ebo had a girlfriend; when she came by, Camara and I took a stroll so they could have time alone. She was married, but that didn't stop her - despite the risk of harsh penalties.

She never stayed long; a suspicious husband was a real

risk. She usually came after dark. I'd walk the neighborhood - alone, or with Camara. Empty streets, the city packed away for the night. No lights, no sound. You couldn't peer into people's rooms; everything was sealed.

Now and then a streetlamp flickered above an empty alley. I kept to the same route so I wouldn't get lost. Coming back, I sometimes caught her slipping away. She said nothing. Didn't look left or right. As if I wasn't there.

I asked Ebo how this could work - what she did was, in truth, dangerous. He said many women had affairs. Marriages were often arranged, men had multiple wives, affection was scarce. So they looked elsewhere, in secret.

They'd met at one of the many public wash places. The setup was primitive. No running water; they fetched it from a fountain. The toilet was a hole in the ground. Sometimes cockroaches came up - big as a fist. Usually the hole was covered, but not always; then they'd scuttle along the walls. They didn't come into the room itself. That was a comfort.

After a week I'd had my fill and decided to move on - to Sub-Saharan Africa. We studied the map. Two options: Senegal or Mali. I chose Mali. No trains, no coaches - only old minibuses run by local drivers headed that way.

Camara walked me to the station, slipped me a few last tips. We hugged briefly. As my minibus picked up speed, I looked back once more and saw him grow smaller among a few stalls and a handful of people waiting.

Across the Desert

We left Nouakchott and pointed the nose toward Mali: nine hundred kilometres of sand and heat. Apart from me there was one other passenger in the Toyota minibus. The seats were improvised: a few blankets, a crate. At first, easy going:

smooth asphalt, steady pace. Then, an hour out, the tarmac stopped like it had been chopped with a knife. After that, potholes and ruts. The driver never lifted. We ricocheted wall to wall, clutching at anything to keep from being flung.

Along the way, more and more got on. Not just people - sacks of rice and flour, chairs, buckets, jerrycans. The roof took the first wave. When that turned into a skyline, the rest was shoved inside - and we climbed on top.

At each stop the bus seemed to pass some new law of physics and still make room. An old man waved frantically with a goat in tow. The driver braked. Two words, a nod, verdict: the goat goes on the roof. Men hoisted it up, legs tied to the rack, ropes cinched tight. The man squeezed in beside us. We were pressed so close the bus felt like a fist slowly closing. People on the roadside kept raising a hand, but by then every inch was truly taken.

Loaded like that, every ripple in the road landed like a punch. The tired suspension groaned; we slid into each other and apart again. No complaints. A sigh, a laugh, a piece of bread passed down the line. A child cried, then went quiet against its mother. Grain sacks jutting, chair legs in my back, someone's elbow parked against my temple. Stifling - and yet a fellowship: a rolling jumble of bodies and belongings.

Boutilimit gave us our first pause. Tea poured in three passes, sugar tacky on my fingers. A man sold peanuts in paper twists. The driver thumped a tyre, twisted a loose wire, and nobody hurried him. Time stretched; you left when it made sense, not when a clock said so.

By afternoon the bus turned into an oven. A jerrycan made the rounds - cap off, small sips, pass it on.

Outside, the world refused to end. Corrugated flats of sand, rock formations like waves frozen mid-crash, a bent

tree here and there, a man with a camel dissolving into shimmer. Nothing to hear but the engine's steady drone and the dust we pulled into the sky. A village now and then - mud huts, waving kids, a hand pump - and then the open again. The air trembled; the sun hung like a bright coin over everything.

A checkpoint stitched the road shut: a rope across the lane, a lean-to hut in shade. The gendarme asked questions that were mostly ceremony. A nod, a flick of the hand - go on. Sometimes it dragged. Someone went inside, came back with a stamped scrap or a shrug. No one griped. This was part of the road, the way dust is part of the desert.

We paused for prayers. Mats unrolled, faces turned east. I stayed back.

'Why don't you join?' someone asked.

'It's not my faith,' I said.

'Then pray to your God,' he said kindly.

I nodded. 'I prefer to pray in silence.'

'All right too,' he said.

In Aleg a dusty market square swallowed and spat us out again: people off, new ones on, onions in sacks, a bundle of softly clucking chickens, a man with a radio glued to his ear. Twenty kilometres on, the bonnet was up and steam was needling the sky. Everyone out, into the shade. The driver stayed calm, topped up the radiator, wiped his hands on his trousers, and climbed back in.

A young couple rode with us. Family in Europe, a plan to follow. He spoke straight ahead, hands resting on the rice sack between his knees.

'I'm done,' he said. 'With Africa. Everything you earn gets shared. The more you have, the more they ask, until there's nothing left.'

He shook his head.

'They strip you bare.'

He flicked me a look to see if I was listening.

'Why build anything? Enterprise gets you nowhere - you're drained. The system teaches you to hold out your hand. In Europe you keep what you earn. No one claims it.'

He despised that old custom. The bitterness came from deep inside. We fell quiet. For me - who had travelled to Africa in a search for community, connection, sharing - it was confronting. There was another side to that solidarity too - a flip side I hadn't considered until then.

Not for resale

Mali was a day too far. We drove until the sky bled red, then pulled off in the emptiness and made camp beside the road. Blankets, sleeping bags - everyone looked for a spot in the sand.

I dragged my Moroccan blanket over my shoulders and stared up. The sky woke up at night - the Milky Way a bright river pouring across the dark. I'd never seen it so sharp. Sleep came easy. I felt safe, as if a crowd of guardian angels had settled around us.

We were up at first light. Tea. Dry bread. A palmful of dates. The minibus cleared its throat - one cough - and grudgingly fired.

Kiffa was our first stop. The call to prayer drifted across the roofs. A peanut seller worked the corner; a grill man turned chicken over coals.

Village after village, people climbed down and the roof gave up sacks of rice and tied bundles.

Ayoun el-Atrouss slid by. The sun climbed; the air shimmered.

In a drowsy hamlet we pulled over with a soft tyre. A

chance to unkink our legs. In a tiny shop I fell into talk with a man who called himself a commerçant. He sold tins, clothes, cooking pots - aid goods from Western organisations, still boxed with logos and the stamp '*Not for resale*'. I told him, plainly, I knew those were meant to be given out for free. Why charge for them? He looked at me, puzzled but unmoved.

'It's trade,' he said. 'I buy it from someone else. Nothing is free.'

Closer to the Malian line, the bus thinned out. One last stop in Kobenni, then the border ahead. I had no visa there either. I pictured another night at a police station and wanted none of it. The driver let me off at a sandy track.

'The border post is there,' he said, pointing. 'A few hundred metres on.'

I couldn't see it - shrubs and low trees hid the view - but he told me to follow the path.

Crossing the Border

After a brief walk a small customs hut came into view. I chose a different approach this time, giving it a wide berth and skirting around until, half an hour later, the first huts of a village appeared. A few children spotted me, squealed, and ran off. *Had they ever seen a white person?* I wondered.

I followed a narrow sand path hemmed in by tall reed fences. Behind them lay small family compounds with round huts, thatch rising to a point. It was the Africa from the classroom wall charts.

A woman approached - no doubt tipped off by the children. She wasn't afraid; she studied me calmly and pointed to a scrape on her arm. Did I have anything for it? I had a

few bandages in my pack and showed them to her. She nodded and beckoned me to follow.

We stepped into her family compound. Four, five huts stood within the fence. With the whole family looking on, I stuck a bandage on her arm. Then it turned out almost everyone had a nick or a scrape - each smaller than the last. They approached me one at a time - six in all - eyes full of expectation, arms lifted.

Before long I'd used up my bandages. They were pleased - almost proud - as if I'd done something special. The father nodded his approval, set a hand on my shoulder, and invited me to share their meal. That night I slept in one of the huts.

Kjolo's family

By the time we ate, night had fallen. The only light came from a small fire, throwing a circle of glow over the ground where we sat around a large pot of millet. In the middle pooled a little gravy with a few paper-thin scraps of meat. Everyone dug in, silently bringing a handful to their mouth. I already knew the ritual from Camara and Ebo, but I still hadn't quite grown used to it. Here there was an extra test: the food was blisteringly hot. The others, even the children, didn't flinch. They ate on as if their hands were heatproof.

I stuck to tiny portions, blowing, testing each bite. Even so - the flavor was so sharp and unfamiliar that I couldn't remember ever eating something I found more revolting. I glanced around, trying to read faces; heat rose in my cheeks and I didn't know how to play it. But I was hungry and didn't want to seem ungrateful. So I kept my expression neutral, took pinprick bites, swallowed slowly, nodded in thanks now and then, and let my hand rest on the rim of the tray

before venturing back in. That way I kept the revulsion in check and went on.

Afterwards, people stood up one by one. No one spoke. The day was over. Kjolo, the father, led me to one of the huts. He handed me a candle for the night.

Life here ran on the equator's timetable: light at six, dark at six. Once the sun dropped, the village went quiet. No electricity, no radio, no television. After supper, people turned in. The silence was complete. It felt as if nothing had changed here for a thousand years.

Before dawn I heard Kjolo's two wives already at it - pots, kindling, the soft crackle of flame. They crouched by a small fire and made breakfast. Millet again, like the night before. I took a breath and accepted it. This was something I'd have to get used to.

At first light, Kjolo's two eldest sons - sixteen, seventeen - set off with a donkey and a rickety cart. Five kilometers away they tended a small peanut field. They worked all day under a punishing sun and didn't return until evening.

Word that a white stranger was in the village spread fast. Children came to stare, curious, giggling. I often didn't know what to do with myself and let the attention roll over me.

Culture shock

Alongside the laughter I saw a few little ones who weren't doing well.

Each of Kjolo's wives had a baby, barely a year old. They sat on the ground, listless, eyes wet, whimpering. No one seemed alarmed. I asked Kjolo what was wrong.

'They don't tolerate the food,' he said.

'And then?'

'Then they don't make it,' he answered calmly.

I looked at him. Did he truly mean that?

'Surely you do everything to save your child,' I thought.

But Kjolo stayed unruffled.

'We'll wait and see,' he said.

I couldn't wrap my head around it - the acceptance, the fatalism. Years earlier I'd taken a Reiki course. It could ease their pain. I asked if I could try. No one objected. I sat with the babies, placing my hands gently on their bellies - first one, then the other. I stayed there for hours. The pain didn't lift; the small cries didn't stop. In the end I had to accept it, as they already had.

A large red patch with a rash marked one side of Kjolo's face. I asked whether he'd ever had it treated. He shook his head.

'There aren't doctors here who can,' he said. 'They're in Bamako, three hundred kilometers away. Once in a while someone comes through in a van - a travelling doctor of sorts - but you have to buy the medicines yourself. And they're expensive.'

He fixed me with a stern look. 'Our fate is in Allah's hands - He decides who lives and who dies.'

For the babies that meant waiting: either they would be called, or they would be allowed to stay. Their parents weren't expected to act. That went against everything in me. Isn't it our task to care for each other, as part of something larger? To me, faith isn't an excuse for doing nothing - the opposite. By acting, through compassion, love takes on weight. Charity is faith in practice. Isn't that the point?

Here, though, surrender meant something else: not intervening, but accepting. God decides, and people wait. We believed in the same God - the God of Abraham - but our ideas of His will, and of our part in it, were worlds apart.

It was a culture shock for me; it took me a long time to find a place for that.

Uproar in the village

Over the next days I learned the village rhythm: unhurried and even. Time was counted in small tasks - fetching water, working the fields, driving goats, pounding grain, praying, eating, sleeping. I kept to the background, watched and listened, tried to understand. The slowness soothed - and made any disturbance feel like a rip through the day.

One afternoon, a sudden uproar split the village. Shouting, panic. Kjolo ran out; I followed. A man was beating one of his wives with a stick. She screamed and darted along the narrow paths between the fences, her husband raging after her. She fled into another compound, where women closed ranks around her. A couple of men held the husband back - he was out of his mind. Calmly, firmly, Kjolo took charge, talked him down, stayed steady. Little by little the man settled. Together they walked him back to his own compound. The woman remained, in tears, held and comforted by the others.

Heading to Bamako

After a week or so I took my leave of the family. Everyone was up, and their warm words made it feel as though I'd lived there for months. They stood laughing and waving. I knew this image would stay with me for a long time.

Kjolo's sons rattled me to the main road on the donkey cart. The farther we left the village behind, the more the sounds and life thinned out - only the soft rasp of wheels in sand kept us company.

Half an hour later we reached a dusty ribbon of gravel, endless, empty. From here the road ran to Bamako. They shook my hand - short, firm - and turned back.

I watched them until they slipped from sight, then let my eyes roam the blank road and started walking. After a while a truck lumbered into view: an old brute from the fifties, half army rig, half museum piece. I put out my thumb. The driver braked.

'Bamako?'

He nodded and jerked his chin at the bed. I scrambled up the side and dropped onto the slick iron, my back against the steel bulkhead that sealed me off from the cab. The sun beat on the metal. Still - I was seated, and I was moving.

Not for long. We hammered across potholes and washboards, and with every jolt I bounced around the bed like a ping-pong ball. There was nothing to grab that would help. Unsustainable. They clocked it in the cab, too. I was waved up front, wedged between driver and mate.

We kept a punishing pace, even through the villages we thundered across. Slowing wasn't on the menu; braking neither. When a goat stepped into the road, he hit it square. The animal arced away and folded, motionless, in the sand. The driver didn't so much as glance over - held the same speed, as if nothing had happened. I turned to him, incredulous. Without a word he flicked up his fist - the wordless sign for: *couldn't care less*.

I hadn't counted on checkpoints. The first one tightened my throat. I told him I had no visa. A quick gesture from him: calm down. He handed over his papers and my passport and explained I was travelling without a visa. The officer looked them over, asked where I was headed.

'Bamako.' A nod.

'Get the visa there.'

That was that. No fine, no cell. I breathed again.

We rolled on for a long stretch. When they turned off at a village, I hopped down and walked. The road grew busier - not with cars, but with people on foot, donkey carts stacked with wood or water, goatherds hustling their flocks along. Threading through them, runners - bare-chested young men, muscular, supple, tireless.

By the roadside stood a small building where you could catch your breath and get something to drink. A few old men sat on low stools in the shade, hunched against a mud wall. I went over, fished my map from my pack, and asked if they could point me to Bamako. They were on their feet at once, leaning over the sheet, their dark, weathered fingers gliding across the paper. They talked in a language I couldn't follow - lively, all hands and signs, like two people wrestling a tricky puzzle.

I expected them to trace a clear route. None came. After a while I rolled the map and thanked them for the trouble. Only later did it sink in: this was likely the first road map they had ever seen. And they might well, like most here, neither read nor write. It could just as easily have been a lovely color illustration.

One of the runners had paused for a drink as well. I asked how long he'd been on the road. He wasn't sure. He had to reach a village twenty kilometers away to deliver a message to a relative. 'You run that?' I asked.

He laughed. 'Of course.'

I walked on. The sun tilted down. In a small village I asked if there was a place to sleep. The open bush on my own didn't appeal; people nearby did. The man I spoke to had his mind elsewhere. A woman stood a little off, and he flung sharp remarks her way. When she was gone, he turned to me. He told me I could sleep here and showed me a spot.

Other travellers were bedding down outside; I was welcome to join them.

Morning brought little progress - a few short lifts. I was halfway. Then, near noon, my old familiar truck reappeared on the horizon. They had a load for Bamako; I could ride all the way. At each checkpoint the driver spoke for me again. Late in the afternoon we rolled into the city, and I watched children playing football on a patch of ground between the trees.

'Back to the world,' I thought.

Bamako

My first task: arranging a visa. No interrogation, a stamp for three months - pay up, finished. There I heard that a Dutch priest lived at a Catholic mission post. I took the address and went to find him.

The place was central, easy to spot. A handful of priests lounged in the courtyard. When I asked, they pointed to the upstairs gallery. He lived on the first floor. I knocked; he opened; his gaze was ice. I meant to ask whether I might stay a night, but he cut me off.

'If you want anything, you can sleep downstairs in the shed,' he snapped in an unmistakable Brabant accent. I reeled - angry, too.

So curt, so inhospitable. What had I done wrong? We traded words, and I told him plainly what I thought of his manner.

'I'm fed up with people turning up here and cadging a bed,' he barked.

'You're all freeloaders - coming to Africa and living off the hospitality of poor Africans. Shame on you.'

Before I could respond, he slammed the door. I stood

there, stunned. Once I'd pulled myself together, I thought: *Fine-guess it's the shed then.*

Below I asked where It was. The man I spoke to tread carefully - our spat hadn't gone unnoticed - but he pointed the way. It wasn't a shed so much as a lean-to: open on one side, garden tools stacked beneath. No room, no hotel. Good enough.

Something else I hadn't planned for: antimalarials. Up in the dry north, mosquitoes were rare. Here, by the Niger, they were everywhere. That night they ate me alive. I swaddled myself in clothes - socks over my hands, T-shirt over my head - anything for cover. Too hot. I soaked in sweat and couldn't sleep.

I walked around a bit and saw two workers sleeping outside on cots.

'Don't they get torn up by mosquitoes?' I looked closer: they did, but they slept on.

'Incredible.'

I didn't close an eye that night.

A gift from heaven

The next day I drifted through the city. Heat lay over the streets like a quilt while motorbikes, minibuses, and taxis wove between stalls, walkers, and handcarts.

Women in bright wraps lined the roadside, chasing patches of shade beneath parasols, bowls balanced high - bananas, mangoes, sachets of water. Men lounged on plastic chairs in the lee of flaking walls, playing cards, laughing, waiting.

Near the station and along the Niger, the traffic bunched up - one slow, noisy creature inching forward.

Down by the river people washed clothes, prayed,

fished, slept. I perched on a low wall and let the world parade past: a farmer easing his cattle through the lush riverside grass; women, jars on their heads, hips moving to an unconscious rhythm; children with shy eyes, dust at their ankles, fingers in their mouths.

I took the big bridge over the Niger, the city falling behind, the outskirts ahead. With no plan, I simply kept walking. The road was thick with garages. Boys of primary-school age lay under rusted cars, worked on engine blocks and held up parts as if they were trophies. When I passed, they glanced up. Sometimes I stopped to watch. Here, everything had a second life. What would be scrap at home was repaired with pride, out in the open air.

Beyond the workshops the houses began - low-rise, flat roofs. I left the main drag and followed dirt paths winding between homes. Often they opened into compounds: plain stone houses set in a square around a bare courtyard.

The smell of fried meat hung in the air. Children's voices bounced off the walls, tangled with the crackle of old transistor radios - kora music, Afropop, the odd thread of reggae.

Soon I had no idea where I was. A maze - but I let curiosity lead. Now and then someone fell in step, hoping for a coin. It never felt pushy - more a kindness, a bid for contact in a world that I preferred to meet unprepared, happy to be surprised.

At last the alleys gave way to a wide sandy lot between buildings. A handful of market stalls stood scattered. I crossed. On the veranda of a small concrete block a group of men my age sat talking.

They called me over, asked who I was, made room. My French was shaky; their patience wasn't. I told them about the road that brought me here. The visa had eaten my last cash. I was basically broke. All I had left was fifty guilders -

my last Dutch money - for emergencies. Was there any work? Not, they said. Then one of them - Karim, short and solid, with an easy smile - said he'd ask around.

I stayed the rest of the day. The tone was loose and warm; jokes came easily. Toward evening a big, broad man strode up: Boubacar - sure of himself, deep voice, thoughtful eyes. He said he could use me at his print shop. He also offered me a room, a little further on, in a compound where one of his wives lived.

I could hardly take it in. A gift from heaven. It turned out Karim had set it up - he'd gone to Boubacar and explained my situation. Boubacar was Christian; Karim, a Muslim, figured he would want to help me as a fellow believer.

For a few days I coasted on that lift. Then the shine wore off, and it became clear that my expectations didn't line up with how things worked there.

Lessons in Time, Work, and Expectation

Back home, a job meant fixed hours and pay you could count on. Not here. Hours slid from day to day. Now and then Boubacar would swing by in his car and we'd head to his place in the centre; more often I was on my own - finding my way there, and sometimes not getting there at all.

Two other boys worked the print shop floor. We stacked the sheets as they came off the press. They were quicker, surer; no matter how I pushed, I couldn't match their pace. By day's end their piles always towered over mine.

Most days I walked the five kilometers to cheque if there was work. With a bit of luck I could jump in; as often I met a locked door and drifted through the city instead.

Pay wasn't clocked. No hourly rate, no contract. On good days Boubacar pressed some notes into my hand; on others I

had to ask, and it might end with a nod - or with nothing. Money stayed scarce, like for nearly everyone around me.

There were certainties too: free accommodation and food every day.

To stretch my budget I considered teaching English. In town I'd met a few money changers, mostly Nigerians, who exchanged Western cash at better rates than the banks. I told them my plan; they knew traders keen to polish their English. That's how I met two businessmen. They'd been grinding away at English booklets on their own, without much progress. The materials were there - that part was easy. We agreed on lessons twice a week, an hour each, at a fixed price.

At first it worked. They came on time; an hour was enough to get things done. I had them read sentences aloud and checked comprehension - the translation sat right beside the text. I pushed for as much English as possible. They spoke only English to me, and as a bonus my French crept forward.

After a few weeks, the seams began show. They started turning up late - an hour, sometimes much more - or not at all. When they did appear, they behaved as if nothing had happened. That grated. Time moved differently here - elastic, generous - but awkward when you were trying to make arrangements. I never got used to it. In the end I canceled both of them. Making a special trip to town only to wait hours on the chance they'd show up - wasn't for me.

On the Veranda

Karim worked as a photographer, his studio tucked into the small building off the veranda. He passed long days there, waiting for clients. Next door, in the same space,

worked Juma the tailor - the busiest man on the strip, especially with women. Out on the open lot, a market sprang up several times a week with vegetables and household wares; on other days a handful of regular stalls kept trading.

When I wasn't in town, I was usually with Karim. His friend Mamadou - everyone called him Momo - was there most of the time too: a big, steady man who rented a room in the same compound as I did. Friends drifted in and out; before long there'd be five or six of us, talking the afternoon away.

One of them - a wiry man with a quick tongue - went by 'Blanc' because he never missed a chance to praise white people. They did everything better, he said. One day the others pressed him: what exactly was so great? They nodded at me. I'd been around a while, and apart from my skin, Karim and the rest saw little difference. Blanc floundered, then admitted his idea of 'the white man' didn't line up with me. The veranda shook with laughter.

The tailor's wife cooked a big pot of rice for us at noon and in the evening. I tried to eat with my hands - another source of hilarity. One day Karim handed me a spoon; I waved it off. Pride. I was determined to learn their way.

My French kept improving. It helped that people spoke a simple variant here, with a limited vocabulary. That suited me well. Among themselves they spoke Bambara, but when I was around they switched. Talk here was pastime; it didn't need a subject, good company. They could keep the thread going all day, day after day.

Around six a television appeared: a portable black-and-white set with an antenna. They'd set it on a table outside and tune in to one of two options - *Dynasty* or reruns of French football. Around eight the signal died. Sometimes I

watched with them; sometimes I wandered the lanes or turned in.

The Room

My room was the size of a cupboard - six square metres. A reed mat on the floor was my bed. Nothing else. At eye level on the street side, a small rectangular opening served as a window. Directly below, outside, stood a grain mill. Its owner had the unhappy habit of firing it up in the evenings. The noise was brutal. He and his friends would sit beside it, shouting to be heard over the din.

When the grinding stopped, the shouting didn't; they kept talking as loudly. They could as well have been inside with me. I once asked if he might sit a little farther off, but he bristled at what he called my colonial attitude. A white man telling him what to do in his own country - no thanks. Boubacar stepped in and persuaded them to move down the street. It worked for one night. The next evening they were back. I let it be. He was right. What was I doing policing the street?

Other Attempts

Looking for another way to earn money, I asked Karim about garden work. By the Niger, the city's vegetable plots lay in rows - that's where they got their greens. I could rent a patch.

'Not your thing. They work like beasts,' he said. 'You? You're not strong enough.'

I didn't buy it.

'Come see,' he said.

We went one afternoon. Young men in nothing but

shorts jogged to the river with buckets, drenched the plants, ran back for more. All afternoon, the same rhythm. The beds were lush - deep green, leaves thick and shining. Watching them, I began concede Karim had a point. I wouldn't last a day. Not in this heat.

And it wasn't only the labor. Getting a plot, clearing it, sowing, buying tools - it all took time and cash. People here worked to keep their own households afloat. Hiring help? Hardly. If they needed hands, they called family.

A fine idea in theory, crossed off in practice. The print shop would have to do.

Uncomfortable Truth

If Boubacar was consistent in anything, it was this: my room never ran out of mosquito coils - those green spirals that, once lit, smoldered till morning. The smell was sharp, the kind mosquitoes avoid. Not exactly healthy. But I slept on the floor; the smoke lifted and slipped out through the little opening, so it barely touched me.

One day Boubacar took me along on a drive that revealed another side of his work. He asked me, pointedly, to come along. We climbed a long stair to a small room where three men in uniform sat waiting - customs, by the look of them. Boubacar made introductions; I shook hands. He laid out some forms, they compared notes, argued a little, scribbled in the margins - and then it clicked: these weren't official papers. We weren't at a customs office at all, but in a nondescript room above a shop, with civil servants looking to make extra money.

Our shop was turning out forged documents.

The realization sat badly. I said nothing. In the car back, I stayed quiet too. I needed time to absorb it.

And it wasn't only the grey zones that struck me; the ordinary roughness of life kept showing up.

A few days later I saw a woman give birth - right there in the street, in the sand. I froze. Other women ran over, pulled a cloth around her, made a wall with their bodies. I stood watching, still stunned, until a man set his hands on my shoulders and, gently but firmly, said, 'Not for men.'

That brought me back; I turned and walked away.

Payment in kind

By then I was woven into the rhythm around the veranda and started to see the patterns. Karim was a handsome man, easy with women. His marriage had cracked after his wife's affair; since then he'd stopped trying to hold the line. New girlfriends drifted through.

The neighbour - the tailor - took the cake. Women filed in and out of his shop, and when it came to settling the price, money didn't always change hands. Payment in kind often did. Momo's room would be taken over temporarily then; he had to go someplace else for a while. It happened nearly every day. His wife - who was beautiful, by the way - didn't seem bothered, from the looks of it.

Or she didn't know, but I doubted that.

Momo had a girlfriend he would later marry. She visited now and then, a young woman obviously crazy about him. He, meanwhile, kept her at arm's length and carried on his own affairs.

'When I marry, I'll be a good Muslim,' he told me. 'I'll go to the mosque every week and provide for my wife and children. Until then, I want to enjoy myself.'

I asked Boubacar why he had two wives, given that his Christianity didn't allow it.

'I'm Catholic - officially,' he said. 'I don't believe in anything.'

About the arrangement: 'Things with the first had stopped working. Rather than divorce and leave my wife and children, I took a second wife. Half the week I live here, the other half there.'

'And how is that - two wives?'

'The more wives, the more problems,' he said, deadpan.

Family as Duty

Boubacar told me that in his world success drew family like iron to a magnet. If you had money, you were on the hook for the rest. Cousins, nieces, barely-related kin - anyone might turn up at your door in a pinch. Turning them away wasn't an option. Family is family.

His father had once run a small business in France, saved a little, and now crisscrossed the country in a rice-laden pickup, dropping off sacks with relatives. No bill, no barter - duty.

It brought to mind the boy on the bus in Mauritania who'd had it up to here with that custom.

Trees in the City

I was most comfortable with Karim and Momo. We talked about everything-women, religion, football, Africa and Europe, poverty, politics, ecology. They could barely read or write - Karim a bit - but they were sharp, informed, and proud of a native intelligence.

'You lean on knowledge,' Karim said once. 'We lean on intuition.'

They knew what we were doing to nature. Their answer

was simple: more trees in the city. They even took up a collection to plant a few out front. But each time a sapling pushed out a tender bud, an old man shuffled by and pinched off the fresh green tips. Karim saw red whenever it happened.

They knew who was responsible and had told him time and again: those trees are meant to grow. At first he ignored it, but in the end he gave up. Karim said it wasn't just them - his own family had talked to him about it too.

Small wins like that kept Karim and Momo believing change was possible - even out on the margins of a big city.

Who Is Salif Keita?

One afternoon I saw Salif Keita - the Malian star - glide past in a Mercedes. Keita is an albino, his skin pale. Back with Karim and the crew, I decided to stir the pot.

'So is Salif Keita white or Black?'

Karim stared at me like I'd taken leave of my senses.

'Black, obviously.'

I shook my head. 'But you can see he's white.'

The question lit a fire. Everyone weighed in; Karim led the charge. He wouldn't have a national hero filed with 'the other side.' The others agreed: skin didn't decide the matter. Keita is Black. Period.

Studying in the Streets

I met Roger, a Nigerian my age. He'd spent a stretch in Amsterdam and loved to talk about it. We fell into step easily. By day he changed money; in the cracks of the day he studied law - no campus, a bench, a shade tree, and library books.

'Law' caught my imagination. As he picked his way through statutes in French, the questions found me, too: who gets to say what's right and wrong? Who confers authority - and on whom? Who decides whether I can play music in the street, whether I must show my papers, explain myself, or be stripped at a border post?

Those talks kept circling back to the same ground. Something was taking root - small, but alive - like the saplings Karim had planted out front.

Devaluation

Then panic hit. France announced, from one day to the next, that the CFA franc would be devalued: the currency would be worth half. People turned to me for answers. The radio said it would boost exports, but what did that mean for them? The foreigner would know. I wasn't an economist, but the export line rang hollow. Mali exported little, and what it did export went to France. Trade with others ran through France as well. On the eve of the change, fuel lines stretched long: tomorrow, prices would double.

Karim trusted the metropole. To him, France was the big brother.

'They'll look after us,' he said.

I didn't share it.

'France looks after itself. It isn't invested in your fate. That's how colonial power works. Don't count on it,' I said.

The city's uncertainty lodged in my body. While people tallied how to make it through the next day, my own system began flicker. The crisis was not out there; it was in here, too.

Malaria

Skipping antimalarials caught up with me. I went down. I'd felt the slope for days. I'd met a young woman in town - a pharmacist raised in Munich, fluent in German - and bought a box of pills from her, but I was already late to the cure.

At dinner one evening, Karim cupped my face, lifted an eyelid, and saw it: yellowed whites. No doubt. He alerted Boubacar, whom he considered responsible for me. Boubacar came and confirmed Karim's suspicion: *malaria*.

After that the slide steepened. Appetite vanished; every bite was labor. My clothes sagged; I could tighten the belt by a couple of holes. Shoulder blades, hip bones - sharp under skin. Sitting hurt; lying hurt less. A hundred metres on foot left me shaking, hours to recover. My head went airy; the edges of my vision dimmed. Nights were a loop of chills and sweat, breath too high, heart stuffed in my ears.

Karim and Momo came with rice or broth; most days I managed a few mouthfuls. They left water, tea heavy with sugar. I sipped, I slept. Street voices thinned to a hum; days ran together. Visits grew shorter; worry grew louder. People feared the worst.

At some point I thought: they've lived with malaria for centuries - there must be something local. I asked Karim about a traditional remedy. He was skeptical. Faith in pills had grown so strong that folk cures seemed like superstition. Karim also took all sorts of pills - not for anything specific, but because he thought they were healthy.

'There is something,' he said at last. 'Do you want it?'

'I do.'

He bought, for a few coins at the market by our door, a bundle of a certain plant. A woman who lived behind the

photo shop with her husband was instructed to make tea from it. Every day I got a glass. It was so bitter that I needed a good twenty minutes to finish it.

After a few weeks I turned a corner. Hunger came back; I walked to the market for bananas and small comforts. My gut settled too - though since arriving I'd had regular trouble. Climate, food, water - who knows? Constipation kept returning like an old acquaintance.

At least the climb had begun, though it took a good two months before I was fully myself again. When I finally was, Karim clapped me on the shoulder and said, '*Now you're a real African.*'

Oumou Sangaré

Word went round our quarter: a free concert by Oumou Sangaré - the Malian star and a fierce voice for women's rights. She'd grown up here, a daughter of the neighborhood, and the anticipation was everywhere.

When she stepped onstage in a long, radiant gown, a ripple ran through the crowd. Her presence was magnetic - force without swagger. Between songs she offered brief messages in Bambara, each one answered by a roar.

The music broke over us in waves, lifting and carrying the field in a tide of rhythm and feeling. People danced, sang, called out. They went wild, yet stayed respectful. Now and then someone scrambled onto the stage, danced a moment with her or alongside her, then was swallowed again by the crowd. A dancer with white paint on his face drove the energy higher with wild, near-trance movements.

It felt like a city breathing out in unison. For a while the hard edges - lack, uncertainty - fell away. Here was someone who had made it, without leaving her people behind.

Break-in

Still humming with the concert's energy, I headed back to my room. Drums and voices echoed in my skull. The door stood open. There had been a break-in. I scanned the place - nothing obvious missing. I hadn't left anything worth taking; my money and passport stayed in the pouch at my waist.

No one in the compound had seen or heard anything - everyone had been at the concert.

Annoying, yes - but I let it go. No harm done. The thief had picked the wrong door.

Departure

Karim had opened a new shop in another district, seven kilometers off. He rarely appeared on the old veranda anymore. I suspected I'd leaned on him a bit too much of late. A small, steady guilt gnawed - not crushing, just there. What hurt most was hardly seeing him. He was the one I felt closest to.

Something had shifted between us without being said - a slide in roles, in expectations, in nearness. Either way, I felt the pull to move on. My health was back; my strength, too. My wallet wasn't. Most of the last fifty guilders had gone to extending my visa. I took a few days to commit. Then I told the others. Boubacar was glad above all that I was well again; he pressed some travel money into my hand. Momo was more guarded. He offered a warning.

'Mali's a calm place,' he said, 'with easygoing people. Not every part of Africa is like that.'

He didn't ask where I meant to go - and honestly, I didn't know. But I understood him: don't drift toward trou-

ble. Not south. So I set my sights east, on Niger. That got his nod.

On the day I left, Momo and I stopped by Karim's new shop to say goodbye. We talked a bit. A brief embrace followed. No big words. We parted like men. No fuss.

Using my remaining cash plus what Boubacar had given me, I bought a bus ticket to Gao - roughly 1,150 kilometers away. I'd figure out the rest when I got there. I still didn't have a visa, but I trusted it would work out somehow.

Eastbound

Momo took me to the bus station early. The place throbbed - motion everywhere - and the air was thick with diesel, dust, and fried plantain. Traders cinched bales onto the roof; a mother tied her child to her back. Momo pressed a few notes into my hand - from him and from Karim - pulled me in, strong arms, one last hold, and that was it.

Six months in, I left Bamako. I felt light, ready for something new, unaware of how quickly everything would change. The driver counted tired banknotes, nodded, turned the key. We pulled out.

The city thinned: low houses, then fields, then the savannah. Inside, the cassettes rolled - Oumou, Salif, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin - and the speaker buzzed at every pothole. The man beside me shared peanuts and asked my destination.

'Gao.'

He tapped my ticket, grinned: 'C'est loin.'

First stop, Ségou. Arms through windows with mangoes, water sachets, brochettes on a wire rack. The engine idled. New asphalt in stretches, black and sharp; then the wash-

board took over. We fishtailed past a lorry stacked with jute. Far off, a herder and his herd.

Sévaré, near Mohti - Tuareg country starts here. We arrived after dark and rolled into a field full of military trucks. The driver talked to a soldier; the rest of us waited, resigned. Warm water from a bottle, soldiers with automatics and blank faces.

We'd only go on in convoy, like in the Western Sahara. It had been quiet for a while, they said, but travellers had been hit here in the past. Better safe.

We were to gather in the morning. The driver led us to the market square to sleep rough, all of us under the open sky.

Secrets

On the bus I'd fallen in with a man from Burkina Faso. We found a spot side by side, set down our things, and kept talking under the stars. His voice was low, measured - meant for me alone. He stared toward a cluster of buildings washed in moonlight.

We drifted to *secrets* - the hidden forces that shore up power. He talked about leaders who seek out healers and spirit-workers, hoping rituals will bend fortune their way.

He nodded slowly, almost ceremonially, as if watching it happen.

'We can be Christian, Muslim, whatever,' he said, looking me straight in the eye.

'But in the end we all believe in spirits.'

His eyes flashed in the moonlight. No doubt there.

Those forces, he added, live inside families too. In hierarchies where elders decide and women rarely do, a quarrel might send someone to a magician. A lock of hair, a scrap of

clothing, a personal thing - the ritual sets unseen powers against a person.

I listened. It drew me in, even as part of me balked. And then Bamako came back to me in a different light.

There was a man I knew there, a teacher at a small school. Pushy, a touch manipulative. He wanted me to pry money loose from Europe. I'd told him more than once I couldn't, but he kept at it. That got on my nerves a bit, and in a somewhat less diplomatic way I made it clear to him that I couldn't help him.

A day or two before I left, we met again. He was all smiles. No talk of money. He asked me to sit. We chatted, and then he asked for a lock of my hair - as a keepsake, he said; that's what good friends do.

It struck me as odd, but harmless. I snipped off a small lock and handed it over.

Only now - there in the sand beside the man from Burkina Faso - did it click: *hmm... that might have been about more than friendship.*

Convoy to Gao

At first light we tucked into a convoy. It took a while to gather speed. The farther we went toward Douentza, the barer the savannah: drier, quieter - villages gone, the occasional island of shade. Heat made the sand wink like water that wasn't there.

For hours the road was nothing but level ground, until Hombori rose up - rock tables and towers massed on the horizon like cathedrals, edges ink-black, the afternoon light thick as syrup. For a moment I was in Arizona, the sweaty western kind, all giant mesas and red-brown cliff faces.

We pulled over briefly at Gossi. People scattered for a

quick pit stop and to shake the stiffness from their legs. The driver raised the hood, ran his hands over the engine and radiator. Out came a jerrycan; a careful top-up, a wipe on his trousers. Then we eased back onto the track and carried on - the final stretch into Gao.

By late afternoon we made it. The bus rolled into the station. People stretched, beat dust from their clothes, called up to the roof for their bags. I stepped off with a dry throat and a bladder that felt ready to burst.

Two Days and a Busload of Patience

From Gao, buses ran to Niamey; the scraps of cash I had covered a ticket - barely. After that, nothing left.

Waiting was the order of the day. For how long, no one knew; timetables were more rumor than fact. What struck me was the calm. No grumbling, even if it slipped to tomorrow. People folded into what came and made it work.

I'd butted up against it before - my Western itch for plans - but in this light it had its grace: acceptance as a way to endure.

Most buses looked familiar enough - European, older - but they were all packed.

Out front, an exhausted school bus from the 1940s ticked in the heat. There was still space there. A French guy and I were the only white faces. We traded a look; the machine told its own story: paint flaking, benches sagging, bald tyres, jammed windows. And a heart - so we'd learn - near the end.

No one else blinked. Millet sacks went to the roof, a goat into the hold, children onto laps. In minutes we were brimful. The driver did a last round - key ring jingling, oil on his fingers - whistled, flicked a hand, and we pulled out.

We shadowed the Niger toward Ansongo. Red dust wrote stripes across the glass. First checkpoint: window down, papers, a friendly murmur, 'un petit cadeau?' A few soft notes, a nod, and on. Ten kilometers later: steam. Rag on the cap, jerrycans upended, a sliver of shade under an acacia, a shove - engine back.

In Labbezenga came the border cheque. Everything had to come out of the bus and into the sand. Four customs officers walked slowly past the goods: peering, feeling, looking for anything they could levy duty on. Suitcases open, bags searched, here and there something taken apart. A few people were taken aside to 'settle up' in the little office.

Then the turnstile for all: 500 CFA to enter. No receipt, no reason. I'd never paid a cover charge for a country; this wasn't by the book. Outside, four identical white Peugeot 504s gleamed - pure status. On a civil servant's wage? I thought of Boubacar's counterfeit forms. Choice there was none. Everyone paid.

Except me. I was skinned.

The Frenchman caught on. Without a word, he slid me the 500 CFA. We all stood in a line outside the little office. Inside, the commander leaned back at his desk like a prince on his throne. After each case he barked for the next. It didn't look good, but I tried to stay calm.

When it was my turn, I got ahead of him.

'I don't have a visa yet,' I said. 'I'll arrange it in Niamey. Here's my bus ticket.'

I handed him my passport and the money. He flipped through it, said nothing. From the well-fed belly under his uniform came a small growl. He looked at me once more, flicked his arm: get out of here.

We pushed on toward Ayorou: corrugations and holes. The bus was so far gone we had to stop every few kilome-

ters. Steam boiled from the hood; we waited for the heat to bleed away. Sometimes we all stood outside, asking ourselves if we'd ever get there, while the driver kept up the patter - nothing to worry about.

Every checkpoint - there were many - cost the driver a little 'oil' to keep things moving. By any standard, this bus shouldn't have been on the road.

The afternoon slid down; the sky turned the colour of copper. A half-day trip stretched into two full days.

Still no complaints. People took it as it came.

At night we pulled over wherever the road allowed. Everyone found a patch of ground. Food passed from hand to hand; talk and laughter followed. The driver - bright-eyed, good-natured - joined right in. He could take a joke about his wreck.

'Not my fault,' he grinned. 'You people build these machines,' pointing at the Frenchman and me.

'Sure,' I said, 'but when they get like this, we scrap them.'

'Non non non non!' he cried theatrically, as if it were his sweetheart.

The crowd howled.

Day two repeated the script. Checkpoints, gendarmes with open palms. The driver gave a tight laugh, counted notes, paid. More stops: overheating, a loose wire, a tire going soft. The sun climbed, then fell. Tillabéri drifted past like a dusty promise. Not far now.

By then, the driver had bribed away his last franc. He walked the aisle asking for contributions. People chuckled; few were keen. In their eyes, it was his mess to manage.

Even so, he talked and smiled and wriggled us through. By evening we rattled into Niamey - stumbling, smoking, but there.

Niamey

I slept my first night at the station, like so many others. On the concrete, wedged between bags, shins, and sleeping bodies.

The next day I met a young Gambian. He'd come the same way I had, with his wife and two small children. They were Christians - warm, open. When he saw I was broke, he invited me to eat.

All along the streets were small eateries - improvised kitchens under awnings, with steaming pots and bowls of vegetables that reminded me of Bamako and the gardens along the Niger, which flowed through this city as well.

As we ate, he told me about life in Gambia. He'd spent time around white tourists and had noticed something.

'White people do things with their kids,' he said. 'Beach days, amusement parks, the zoo. Africans don't. We stay home and let the children run.'

His church was trying to shift that. Special days for the little ones - outings, games and sports, faith-themed events. His talk carried commitment, but also longing. For change, for attention, for something he'd seen once and couldn't unsee.

We spent the day together. He seemed to take it as a Christian duty to look after me - his neighbour. I was grateful, but uneasy. He had almost nothing, and I didn't want his family to tighten their belts for my sake. I needed to find something. A way forward of my own. But what?

I still had no visa - not because I didn't want one, but because I simply couldn't afford it.

Benefits?

An idea surfaced. There was a Dutch consulate in town. I'd once heard you could apply for Dutch social assistance from abroad. That was a way through. I decided to try.

The walk to the consulate took me through one of Niamey's leafier districts: wide boulevards, tall trees throwing islands of shade, villas behind high walls and iron gates.

The contrast with the rest of the city was stark. This was where money lived - embassies, NGOs, aid outfits.

One building had its door propped open. Inside, a few white faces hovered over laptops - Dutch, as it turned out, working for an aid organization. I stepped in, hoping to trade a few words.

I'd been hungry for that small jolt of recognition - it had been ages since I'd seen anyone from home - but they weren't in the mood. Short, distant. Busy, probably.

Shame.

The Consul

At the consulate I met the consul himself: big, imposing, with a formal bearing softened by an easy kindness. I laid out my situation and asked if applying for benefits from abroad was possible. He listened, nodded, then asked for my passport and disappeared into a back room.

I remained alone in a cozy, bright room. There were flowers and plants everywhere. Through the window: a garden and a swimming pool gone cloudy, choked with leaves.

A tall cage stood in the centre with a parrot that shat-

tered the quiet every few minutes with a piercing screech. The air conditioning hummed; the room was cool.

It was me and the bird. I drifted over, tried a few soft words, a couple of goofy noises. It tilted its head, giving me a side-eye that felt suspiciously human, but said nothing.

Without thinking, I slid a finger through the bars - a peace offering.

It struck instantly, hard enough that for a second the finger might be broken. I swallowed the yelp, clamped my hand between my knees, and squeezed to smother the burn.

What a horrible beast.

My finger was still throbbing when, after a quarter of an hour, the consul returned. He smiled kindly and said, 'Everything is in order otherwise.'

'What do you mean?'

He'd run my details, he said - to be sure I wasn't wanted by the police. It threw me for a beat, then I let it go. It made sense.

Yes, I could apply for a benefit, he went on, but it would take at least six weeks. And there were hurdles: a residence permit, an official address, paperwork I couldn't possibly wrangle without money or a network. He saw the disappointment.

'Why not call your parents,' he said, 'and ask them to send money for a ticket home?'

Home. No one had said that word to me in months. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind. Go back? I wanted to finish the trip. Not now. Not like this. He held my gaze.

'Take your time. And if you want to call, I can lend you the money for the phone.'

I hadn't expected that. It hit like clear sky split by thunder.

He saw someone in need and offered help. I didn't see

myself that way. I was supposed to figure it out, to find my own route forward. In that plan, the consul was one step.

Asking my parents for money felt like surrender. Like folding. What would be left of the plan then? Of the vow to keep going until I couldn't?

Was this where it ended?

Free and Alone

Back in the city I wandered around with my thoughts. On a hard stretch of sand I saw a group of boys playing football. In Bamako I'd joined in sometimes - fast, physical games. But when I had the ball, they held back. They didn't want to hurt me. This time I stayed put. No desire to join.

A movie ran in my mind: why I'd come in the first place. The hunt for a society where people take care of each other. Where community still breathes.

And here it was, right in front of me. People looking out for one another. Even for me. No one left behind. It looked like the society I'd imagined - yet it wasn't.

Here, chances to grow as an individual were thin on the ground. Schooling was rare. What you learned came through the family line - father to son, mother to daughter. Only when a foreign company or an NGO moved in and needed hands for a specific job did anything appear that passed for 'education.'

Once, in the little annex by Boubacar's print shop, I watched a group of women taking a computer class taught by someone from a foreign firm.

Slowly it dawned on me: if I wanted to make something of my life - if my ambitions stretched beyond the immediate present - this wasn't the place.

Back home, opportunities were there for the taking.

Here, life ran on traditional rails. Everyone knew their place, slotted into the hierarchy, kept to the track. The individual bowed to the collective. You belonged to the community, whether you chose to or not.

Which meant you were never alone. There was always a voice nearby, a hand, a presence. They didn't know loneliness.

I tried once to explain it, sitting on Karim's veranda - what it means to be alone. To open the door to a silent house. No voices. No one's hand on your shoulder. Days with nobody truly seeing you. Weeks where you never have to answer 'How are you?' - because no one asks. Even in a crowd, the space between you and others can be so wide, so cold, that you end up choosing solitude yourself.

They listened with tilted heads, faint smiles, not understanding. I was describing a condition that, for them, wasn't real - a sickness from another world. They couldn't picture it.

And then I asked myself: is that the crux?

*Either you're free and lonely.
Or you're connected but less free.*

After sleeping on it, I knew.
I chose the first.

Going Home

The next day I returned to the consul and told him I wanted to call my parents. I'd already stopped by a travel agency: a ticket to Amsterdam would run about a thousand guilders.

He pressed a handful of coins into my palm for the

phone booths at the station and gave me a bank account number where the money could be wired.

My father picked up. My mother was so keyed up he kept having to hold her back - she had to speak to me. The call turned messy: my mother overflowing with emotion, my father doing his best to stay steady.

Still, the point landed. He said he'd transfer 1,200 guilders right away.

After that, it took another three days before the money was here at the bank. Once I'd withdrawn it, I went to the consulate to repay the consul.

As a thank-you I'd bought a berry bush for his garden. He accepted it with a smile, wished me a safe journey, and asked me to pass along his greetings to my parents.

I also tried to track down my Gambian friend. I wanted to give him something in return for all he'd done. I never found him. They had likely moved on. A pity.

I flew home via Bamako and Casablanca. Casablanca threw up a final snag: I had no Moroccan visa. The travel agent had sworn it wasn't needed for transit. Customs disagreed. No visa meant no official entry - even for a connection. The clock was ticking; my plane would depart soon. One officer, who seemed to grasp the situation, leafed through my passport, gave a small nod, and brought the stamp down.

'This will do,' he said.

At Schiphol my parents were there, and my eldest sister. A few hours later I was home again.

This time I intended to live differently, to stop drifting from day to day. I had never finished anything; that would change. The seed Roger planted back in Bamako had taken root.

I went on to study law.

EPILOGUE

THIRTY YEARS ON

One more third to go

Every so often it hit me without warning - a flash of memory, a small detail that stopped me in my tracks and made me look back at the road I'd walked. I'd finished law school. I stepped into the career I'd driven myself toward for years. Ten years in a sharp suit: files, filings, court calendars. From the outside it looked like success. Inside, I knew it wasn't.

My son arrived near the end of my studies. It should have been a clean turning point - joy, connection. In part, it was. And at the same time it ushered in the hardest stretch of my life. The relationship collapsed. What followed wasn't the tidy, movie-version breakup with relief or dignity; it was a long, low war. For twelve years I lived under the hostility of my ex-partner and her mother - as if I'd been not a partner but the household's enemy. In their eyes I wasn't good, not a father, barely a person. Every attempt to stay close to my son met suspicion, resistance, control, accusation. Those years wore something down in me. I learned what it is to be

methodically pushed to the edge when all you want is to stand beside your child.

The legal profession offered no comfort. If anything, it stripped me. I mislaid my nearness, my sense, my instinct. I became all head. I wasn't willing to trade myself away for that. On top of it, I kept clashing with the tax office - the bossy tone, the hard edges. It felt like I was working for them, not for me. Fines, disputes, the loop repeating. I'd had enough.

After a decade I pulled the plug. The feeling was release. And then I did something many found odd but that felt natural to me: I picked up my guitar and took to the street again.

Not Stockholm or Rome this time, but Oldenburg - over the German border, not far from Groningen where I lived. I went most weekends. By day I slept or walked the town; after dark, when the cafés opened, I set up in the current of the night. People stopped, laughed, listened, and dropped some loose change into the guitar case. Sometimes the encounters were brief; sometimes a circle formed around me and beautiful moments emerged. Singing together, someone taking over the guitar, someone starting a song - and sharing the joy, late into the night.

I lived that way for ten years. Weekdays I did volunteer work at the garden association where I kept a small place; weekends I crossed the border and became a musician again. There was a freedom in it I'd never felt in court - immediate give-and-take, spontaneity, applause you earn not with rhetoric but with sound, with feeling.

Then the world stalled. Covid. Streets empty, cafés closed, borders shut. Overnight there was no nightlife, no audience, no reason to unclasp the guitar case. It was as if someone snapped the lights off.

The phone rang - my father. His voice was firm, with a tremor underneath. My sisters had decided it was time to move our parents into a care home. Everything was already arranged, as if it were a signature and a moving van away. But my parents refused.

'We want to stay in our own house,' my father said. 'We don't want to leave.'

I listened and knew what he was asking. He didn't ask; we both knew I would come. So I moved in with them. Not because it was easy or cost nothing, but because it felt like the only right course.

My sisters were furious. They felt bypassed, as if with one decision I had destroyed all their work.

They turned their anger on me first, and soon on our parents too, as if choosing to stay at home were a fault. Irresponsible, stubborn, ungrateful: the labels flew. And me? The traitor, the wrench in their plan.

Sometimes I wonder if there's a pattern to it all - camps forming, and me ending up on the wrong side every time. First in love, then at work, later in my own family. But what does 'wrong' mean? To me it felt like I kept trying to be true to what was true for me. As a father, as a human being, as a son.

Life with my parents settled into new rhythms. No more cafés or late nights - breakfast together, cooking, doing the wash, short walks. Silence would fall now and then, the kind that used to make me uneasy; now it felt soft and natural. My father in his chair with the TV on, my mother watching along or turning pages in a magazine. I knew how rare that was. How many people get to be this close for their parents' last years?

There were rough patches. I'd hoped things with my father would mend, that he'd be grateful I'd pulled them

from his daughters' grip. The opposite proved true. I relived my youth with all the incomprehension, the struggle for recognition and appreciation I had longed for all my life. In all those years nothing had changed. Then it dawned on me that proving myself right was pointless. He inhabited his version; I inhabited mine. No bridge to span that gap. So I loosened my hold. It was an unsatisfying ending: no reconciliation, no relief, no easing of the pain.

What followed was acceptance. My father was simply a man bounded by his limits; malice wasn't the engine. Once I dropped my expectations, the pain thinned too. A lesson in humility: love without needing to win, care without applause, stay close without being seen - and still choose to be faithful.

The outside pressure didn't lift. My sisters severed all contact; even the grandchildren stopped coming. They were hard, sometimes merciless. But I'd learned to stop trying to win every fight. I'd fought enough - in courtrooms, in love, on the street. This time I chose steadiness without struggle. I stayed put. I was there.

While things with my son's mother - and even with her mother - had long since settled, I doubted that peace would ever return between my sisters and me.

Three years after I moved in with my parents, my father died at ninety-one. Not long before, my mother had been placed in a nursing home with dementia. We sold the house, and I found myself back out on the street. Everything I once relied on vanished quickly - no childhood home to fall back on anymore.

Nothing held me there anymore. My life had left me without any real friends. The only person I spoke to regularly was my son - not a reason to stay; he had his own life. Nor my mother; by then she no longer knew who I was.

In a small camper, thinking that - judging by my parents - I might still have a third of my life ahead of me, I set off across Europe. I headed south and spent time in Switzerland, Sardinia, and Spain. Now and then I'd found a place to settle, and each time it slipped through my fingers. A small inheritance should have bought a modest place in the south. I pictured a whitewashed cottage above the sea, a little garden, a quiet life.

It went another way. No house - another wandering life. Day to day, as before, except now I had the means not to be scraping by. No daily fight for food or a roof, but the freedom to move and still find rest. I stayed with people for stretches, watched their houses, worked in gardens for room and board.

All the while, I kept writing - this book, yes, but above all in my mind. Again and again I circled back to the same questions: Where had I actually arrived? Had I grown in any meaningful way? Had I become a better human being? Or was I merely repeating old moves on the same board, the circle closing without real change? And more crucial still: *was the divine sonship of God waiting for me?* For deep within me the question burned on: is that not the purpose of a life?

A definitive answer never came. What remained was faith - a conviction that sometimes shook me and at other times gave me renewed strength. One thing, however, had become clear: in those years I had come to know myself more honestly - especially the parts I struggled with. My impatience, my stubborn streak, my pride, my flare-ups, just to name a few. Tenacious traits that showed no sign of yielding.

Yet there was light, slowly growing at the end of the tunnel. An insight that had taken shape over time: to *love God above all things, and your neighbour as yourself.* That is the

direction I tried to walk in. Simple words, but a demanding path. And still, hope remained.

Love for God is, in essence, love for the good, the true, and the pure. I orient myself toward a moral north star that stands above my own impulses and fears. By loving something greater than myself, inner steadfastness arises. The higher the source from which I love, the freer and more unconditional I can be in my relationships with others. I no longer need to draw my worth from work, success, appearance, or the opinions of others. Not everything revolves around me. People often become entangled in fear, jealousy, pride, and insecurity, but love for something that rises above all this creates space and freedom. By loving God, suffering also gains meaning; it becomes more bearable because it is part of a greater whole.

To be able to love God, He must be a person to me - a human being, not an abstract idea. In His image we were created, male and female. A person who revealed Himself in Christ as the redeemer of our suffering. Someone to whom I can truly turn, with whom I can build a personal bond through trust. Someone to whom I can ask things and with whom I can lay down my worries.

To love my neighbour as myself, it helps me to realise that we are free beings in a temporary existence. We are all on our way to the same spiritual destination: *the divine sonship of God*. In this life we must come to terms with who we are and the choices we make. That is why one thing truly matters: learning not to judge. The key lies in self-knowledge. Whoever looks honestly at themselves discovers their own shortcomings ever more clearly - often more than they would like. But it is precisely these flaws and weaknesses that form the soil for inner growth. And from that, a natural

gentleness toward the shortcomings and peculiarities of others begins to arise.

I think that whoever loves another - with their flaws, choices, and vulnerabilities - at the same time forgives something within themselves. Then peace arises. Love finds room. Healing begins. And so, step by step, you become who you truly are: a child of God.

Duality

Another insight that brings me a great deal is that the duality of our existence does not have to paralyze us - certainly not in our fear of evil. I began to see that evil is not only an opponent, but also a necessary counterforce. Without resistance, there is no growth. Without pain, no understanding.

Evil calls us out. It keeps setting choices in front of us, like a circle in which opposing forces meet time and again. And each time - after turmoil and confusion - love can win. Then you see it: darkness is only the backdrop that lets the light stand out. So yes, we can even be grateful that evil keeps giving us chances to grow stronger, to overcome it.

Thirty years later I see the same interplay, but on a global scale. I speak with many who are worried. They talk about a worldwide conspiracy - people behind the scenes who would keep humanity in their grip. The story goes that a centuries-old plan is finally coming due: a future where technology enslaves us and freedom turns into an illusion.

The fear is palpable. People point to signs of control everywhere - digital money, artificial intelligence, genetic tinkering. As if a web is being spun to catch us, slowly and surely.

But whenever I end up in those conversations, I try to

offer a different angle. I say: there's a countervailing force - and it's there for a reason. What's true in a single life is true for all of us: without pushback we stay asleep. Threat wakes us; it forces responsibility; it deepens the soul.

It feels like we're sharpening the knives for a decisive clash. The world is at a tipping point. You can sense the pull between light and dark almost everywhere - nearby and across the globe. Chaos is in the air; everything feels razor-tense.

But I believe the outcome is certain. Darkness cannot extinguish the light. However deep the night may be, dawn always returns. Evil may frighten and challenge us, yet unintentionally it draws us closer together - just as the Good Shepherd gathers his flock.

He is coming. *A promise is a promise.* And promises of that order are not broken.

From that trust, I shape my thoughts and live my days. No epic quest, no heroic duel - a simple life where, day by day, I set fear down a little more.

For life here on earth is not something to cling to. It is here to teach us. To teach us that it is not matter, but the spirit, that carries true life. That is why evil cannot break me. It merely invites me to love more deeply. And in that, I think, lies the answer I searched for so long - not in perfection, not in a straight line upward, but in the willingness to pass again and again through the circle of light and darkness, *until love sings the final note.*

