

*Trolley suitcase*

Arriving at the city's station, I get off the train. In my black trolley suitcase is a recyclable plastic bottle, a cheese roll, a letter from my grandfather, documents from the city's archive about my great-grandfather's family, a note book, a camera, a city map, some pens, a recording device, headphones, a lump of clay and a pair of extra shoes.

During the train journey, I'd scanned the points marked on my city plan and tried to join them up to make a route and learn it off by heart.

Aged 24, I occasionally spent time in this city. A hundred years before, great-grandfather and his family had lived in this town.

I go past the station café. In grandfather's letter to his cousin in a neighbouring country he arranges to meet her in exactly this station café, on a Sunday, after the Great War had finished. They haven't seen or heard from each other for a long time. During the war the borders had been closed. Two of grandfather's letters come back to him unanswered; his cousin had gone into hiding.

I leave the station heading towards the lake, going through a neighbourhood that's similar to the one I used to live in with my family during my scholarship abroad, on the edge of a large city. There, in the enormous heat, without a breath of breeze, the air stands still. I go into a small grocery store to buy cold lemonade for us all.

I rush on through the streets, which become narrower and narrower, my suitcase going clickety-clack because of the splits in the pavement, and there's dog shit, trodden-on dog shit, on the ground. There, in the other big city, I always had to keep my eyes on the ground to avoid treading in shit.

Back in this city, which I know yet is foreign to me, I'm overwhelmed by a strong feeling of being lost; it's as if the ground has been pulled out from under my feet. My body reacts, muscles tense up and overflow with energy. The forlorn feeling vanishes and my senses become wide-awake. I hear better, I smell better and I begin visually analysing everything around me. But I do it secretly – the surroundings are aware of me too. Just now a man's

looking at me, whispering something incoherent whilst making a grimace. I avoid his stare, I don't want him to notice that I've noticed him; I don't want to attract attention right now, I just want to feel safe.

While I keep on walking, I put my right hand into my jacket pocket more often, feeling for my purse with my money, my credit card, my ID card and my mobile phone.

Down at the lakeside I follow the promenade through a babble of different languages.

Strolling along I look at faces coming towards me and then passing by, in amongst them the face of a young girl who's friends with my daughter. As it comes closer it has turned into an unfamiliar face. In other cities I often see faces I seem to know.

I stop at the shore, look out over the lake where a distance opens up; I can see a further horizon, feel a sense of freedom. I seldom have this feeling, and in the city I live in now not even when I stand down at the lake.

The sun is shining, only a couple of hazy clouds, the sunlights reflect on the rippling water, a light wind blows. The grey houses on the opposite shore tower up six, seven stories high. A friend of mine tells me about another city, when the light in winter is the most pretty. At this time of year she sees more nuances of grey. I look at this other city, with white steamer boats in the water, in the background the buildings in various shades of grey. The ships stand waiting for people who want to go to the neighbouring islands or sail up the river to reach the sea to the north.

Some people are bathing despite the cold weather and are swimming close to the shore. Is the water cold? Once, in a northern country, I dip my whole body into a half-frozen lake. I don't manage to swim in it, I can't feel my limbs anymore and I can't control my breathing.

I walk along the lake, pulling my suitcase behind me. To my right a large road with lots of lanes. There's a lot of traffic and the roar of the passing cars and the mopeds makes everything very loud. Standing at the traffic lights, which are on red, waiting a long, long time. I get tired of waiting and cross the street with the signal still red, weaving my way

between the cars, running fastly. My daughter says that I always run across the street, however much traffic there is and whichever city the street's in.

I quickly take my mobile phone out of my pocket and check via GPS if I'm still following the route I'd tried to memorise. I'm still on the right track.

I walk on and start looking for the street where my grandfather's lace shop stood at the turn of the last century. The municipal archive has given me the exact address. In one letter grandfather writes that great-grandfather arrived in the city as an immigrant to export yarn to the land he came from in the Near East, where his father made it into handmade lace fabrics and then sent the finished products back to him. Great-grandfather sells the lace in his retail shop. After three years of doing business, he and his wife and their son move to another town in the same country and open a new lace shop.

My father tells the story that, aged 11, one Sunday he and his parents visit the old shop in this city. His father proudly points to a stately house where great-grandfather had had his lace business. Today I find myself standing in front of the large shop window of a department-store chain. Sticked on the window, in black printed letters, "PRODUITS DE PREMIERE NECESSITE!" Right now there's a sale on kitchen utensils, such as pans, glasses, tea towels. The customers are streaming into the department store and back out again.

Not far from the department store, a little way up the hill, close to the earlier lace shop, is where great-grandfather, his family used to live. Based on a household bulletin, the municipal archive knows that during the three years they are residents there that great-grandfather's sister visits them for a number of days. The sister's home country was in the Near East, that's what's recorded in the document; after that she probably moved on to settle in the neighbouring country. In a town on the Mediterranean she marries a man. They have a son in their new home country. I've got photos of this family and a document that says that the whole family disappears during the war.

Grandfather writes that six of the seven siblings, including great-grandfather, left their home country in 1900 – one brother settled, like him, in this country, the other four siblings in the neighbouring one. At school in their home country they learn the language spoken in this city and the neighbouring country.

I count the steps from great-grandparents' house to the lace shop: 213 steps in total. How many times a day did great-grandfather walk these 213 steps – twice a day, once in the morning, and again in the evening? Or back and forth several times a day?

A man in a long coat walks past me, moving as if he was dragging one leg behind him, reminding me of an old friend of the family.

With my right hand I check if my purse and my mobile phone are still in my jacket pocket. My right arm hurts a bit from pulling the suitcase, so I switch to pulling it with my left hand.

I cross a bridge. To my left a building with a dome, above the doorway ornaments, engraved scriptures and two stars. I notice the building for the first time. Fifteen years ago, I walk down the same street without paying any attention to the religious building. Then I'm interested in other things than researching in the past of my family, instead my urge is to be able to put some distance between me and them.

Not far from that building is the Hotel de l'Etoile. A document, a residency permit issued by this city, states that great-grandfather is a guest in this hotel at the beginning of the twentieth century, before, seven years later, he settles here with his family – as a young man and just arrived from the Near East.

Was it a coincidence that great-grandfather stayed in a hotel close to this religious building? Perhaps he tried to make contact with the members of the community in the place?

In the distance I see small dots that are moving. I know there's a large square up ahead and I remember a two half pipes on the edge of a square. Visiting this city earlier I sometimes watch the skaters and BMX riders, how they ride up and down the half pipes, balancing briefly on the ledges.

Approaching the square it unfolds into a single huge skate park, the numerous bowls and ramps now set deep in the ground rather than sticking up. Kids and teenagers are messing around all over it, disappearing into a hole on the one side and shooting out and upwards on the other, flipping skilfully and disappearing again. I push my hand into the suitcase and

scoop out a handful clay from a plastic bag, kneading it until it's soft and pliable. I roll a small ball and let it roll down the skate ramp and watching how the dirt sticks to it.

I notice that the surface of the square is made of granules and is shining red. In the past the ground here was brown earth, covered with more-or-less green thick grass. To cross the square it costs me some energy because of its size, but I want to get on the other end, because I there is a street that's where I used to stay.

On a bike, a woman with glasses. I think I know her from working together in the past.

The suitcase no longer rolls as easily as on the tarmac, and at the other end of the square I sit down on a bench to have a rest. Both my arms now hurt from pulling the suitcase. I open it and drink a sip of water from the plastic bottle and start chewing on my sandwich. Sitting here I can see all the rows of houses that enclose the square. Up on the roofs of the houses, in large illuminated letters, "L'ORDRE N'A PAS D' IMPORTANCE".

I let my gaze wander. The view of the square is strange to me but at the same time very familiar. Memories of the place mix with my new impressions: in my inner eye a new picture of the place composes itself, so close to me as if I would always sit here and this city were my home.

I get up, hurry on, cross over tram lines – click, clack – go up the street to find the house where I sometimes stayed. I can't remember any more what the house looks like from the outside – an old house, ready to be demolished, a communal flat. The stairwell is made of dark wood and slightly rotten. In the kitchen the dim light from a dangling lamp over the long kitchen table.

I do my photo project about cheap everyday objects during my visits to this rundown house – the house is full of them. I arrange coloured plastic objects in front of differently coloured backgrounds and photograph them, functionally, from above. For instance the pink-coloured washing-up bowl against the orange-brown tiled kitchen floor. Or a red toilet plunger on a violet-painted wooden floor. Or a red toilet foot-warmer rug with long, synthetic fluffy shag pile on a cream-coloured plastic floor.

I see a dark-green, featureless new building. Is this where this old house used to stand?

The way back leads past a pastry shop. People are queuing up in front of it and a woman takes one photo after another of the shop window. Behind it are two women with white aprons and white bonnets, their nimble, diligent latex fingers forming a stiff white mass into balls, flipping them in different sugar crumbs and then arranging them in rows with coloured coatings in display shelves for the customers. I queue up, and wait. I enter the confectioner's and buy a couple of the sweets that are a pink, white or gold. I tuck them away in my suitcase.

I briefly glance at my mobile – I've lost my way, I have to head north towards the city centre. On a building I read the words "TRAGEDIE – COMEDIE – LYRIK – POESIE".

I follow the water up-river. In the distance I hear the happy shouting of children. I remember in the neighbouring country I read the names engraved in a wall of those who were persecuted and arrested there, in their own country, among them members of my family too. In the background I hear the cheerful children's voices; there's a school right beside the wall. A family's fate can turn out so differently depending on which land you're in.

I go on further, crossing a bridge. This bridge is right next to the lake. The cars thunder past me: the more I move towards the middle of the bridge, the more I feel it shaking. Each time a car drives over it, the bridge begins to sway lightly. The ground beneath my feet doesn't feel as safe any more. I stop, grasp firmly onto the suitcase handle, and watch the people around me. They walk on unperturbed, one foot after the other. They're obviously concentrated on something else, but what?

I climb a hill, still dragging the suitcase behind me. After all this time, pulling it along is becoming a real effort. Why didn't I leave it in a left-luggage locker at the station? The suitcase is a burden; I start stopping for short breaks.

Out of a building, its iron gate opening slowly, rides a man on a woman's bicycle. Behind the gate, anti-tank barriers appear. I'd seen such massive barriers once in a distant country. In an armoured car I am being driven to a building, its driveway barred with an iron gate. As it swings open, it reveals a high concrete wall that turns right five metres up ahead. The car rolls slowly past the wall, turns right and stops in front of a guard box. A man armed with a mirror

attached to a long pole, peers underneath the car to check that there isn't a hidden bomb attached the chassis. Another left turn, and then at the end of the concrete gully a garden area and a double-storey white building. The grounds and the building represent a secure tiny piece of home in the middle of this large foreign country.

A light rain begins to fall, a drizzle mixed with dust from the Sahara. My suitcase is covered of yellow sand, the sky has a reddish tinge. There's hardly anyone on the street anymore, every now and again a jogger overtakes me. I continue pulling my suitcase up the hill.

In large letters a banner announces: "UNE QUESTION DE VIE OU DE MORT". I'm standing in front of the building complex of an international federation. In my father's letter to his cousin, it says that he has written to this international federation because a number of family members in the neighbouring country have disappeared during the war – in the hope that the federation can find out what has happened to the members of the family. The international federation never writes back to my grandfather. Indignant, I take my camera out of the suitcase with the intention of photographing the slogan "A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH", but then I decide against it.

I turn away from the building complex, and go into a park. I hear the sound of bird's twittering, which puts me at ease. The air smells pleasantly fresh, like wet soil. I take the lump of clay out of the suitcase, peel it out its plastic covering and place it down in the wet grass. I watch how a fine coating of dust from the Sahara congeals on its surface.

Downwards. The suitcase feels really light now: I hardly even notice that I'm still pulling it, it rolls almost by itself. On a large square paved with large stone slabs I stop. The yellowish-greyish sky is almost the same colour as the building at the end of the square. Very quietly I hear how the flags in front of the building flatter in the wind. I take out the recording device, plug the headphones in, and press "record". Through the headphones I perceive another sound. I hear an airplane starting. I look up into the sky, its light hazy in the Sahara dust: everything appears as if looking through a soft-focus filter.

I feel that the ground is slippery, from the sand, the moisture of the rain; a jogger, who I've crossed paths with one before, runs past me again. I glance at his face to see if he also recognises me again.

On my right a large concrete building. The only people are four teenagers dancing in front of the entrance of the building. They repeat the same sequence of dance steps over and over again, the mirrored glass of the doors allowing them to watch themselves. They don't register me; I watch them for a while. One of the girls stops her dancing and kicks a plastic bottle into the air. The group of girls starts to giggle nervously. A second girl copies the first and kicks another bottle away, landing in my direction. I carry on walking.

I leave the area around the building and continue towards the train station. It's getting dark already, I have a rest on a bench: my legs are like lead and my feet are hurting. I change my shoes. I take my notebook out of the suitcase and retrace the route I've taken with my pen. From my bird's-eye view I see how I move through this city here, how the falling rain leaves the Sahara sand on the lump of clay, how the clay dissolves and blends with the muddy soil. One of the portions of the purchased gold-coloured sweetmeats is embossed with the name "L' IMPENSABLE". I push it into my mouth and try to likewise record it as an event in my cartography.

A middle-aged woman comes towards me and asks politely, in a foreign language that I understand, if she can sit down on the bench next to me. I nod my head.

I get up and move on. In the evening twilight other impulses around me become louder, my awareness of my surroundings begins to wane. My body relaxes. A friend of mine says to me: "Photography exists to forget, both the past and the future, so as to only concentrate on the here and now." "Isn't that the same about walking?" I can mentally change rooms and a times while walking and my body always is being in the present.

I let myself drift with the now swelling flow of people on the street. They're in a rush to get home, hurriedly shopping for things before the food shops close, or buying takeaways. I likewise buy myself a warm meal and climb into the train with my black suitcase. The train leaves the city.