

THE BIKE.

Finally, after she returned, she told me.

She was smoking while I was washing the dishes. She still seemed somehow far away. She was staring out of the window, not moving at all, while the cigarette in her hand slowly turned into a long fragile finger of ash.

"It was actually quite horrible, the whole week," she said, and the ash fell to the tablecloth when she abruptly turned her head in my direction.

According to what she said, it had not been about the traveling alone, which she didn't mind, but rather about the lack of a place to rest. She had been there alone, but never had the chance to really be by herself. She shared the room in the hostel with 9 other strangers and never felt comfortable spending time there. Nor did she feel comfortable in the kitchen in the hostel, a cheerful meeting place for foreigners from all over the world. She only rarely sneaked in there to quickly make some tea in the early morning, then escaped from the hostel to eat her banana and some crackers. She ate on a park bench or on the stairs of a monument, or sometimes, when it was raining, in the subway.

Afterwards she made sure that she didn't have to return before the late evening, only to take a long hot shower and then go straight to bed. She didn't even feel like reading there, in the presence of the others. When they were all gone, the mere possibility of someone entering at the room any time made it impossible to relax.

On the park benches she wasn't alone, of course, nor in the cafés, libraries, or museums that she would visit. Always in somebody's sight, she started to feel observed, watched, and hunted by the indifferent glances. A constant feeling of displacement started to stick to her like chewing gum. She was lacking justification for being in the city, and the whole city, every single building, was surveying her moves with knitted brows, barely tolerating her presence. She spent most of her time just walking around, from one café to the next, or without any destination, one street after the other. As long as she walked she felt a bit better, or at least occupied in some way; she felt almost invisible as long as it seemed as if she was heading somewhere.

Once in a while I held on with the dishes, kept the wet plate in my hand for a moment and turned my head to look at her as she was speaking. She was not looking at me. One of her hands was playing with some strands of hair that had come undone, and her eyes were moving all over the room, but didn't seem to see anything. She must have been really walking a lot, at least all over the center of town. A few times I asked about a street or a place I remembered, and she always instantly knew what I was talking about and where it was located.

"It was the bike that saved me", she said. She found it at a fleamarket; it was in really bad shape, but functioning, and it cost less than the amount she daily spent for public transportation. The old man who sold it to her didn't speak any English, and she had to bargain about the price using her hands and fingers. In any case, she managed to buy it, and it changed everything. It had been light blue at some point, but that was rarely showing anymore. Now it was almost totally covered with rust, and appeared to have a warm brown color. It didn't have gears, or rather it used to, but something got stuck and it was no longer possible to switch them. The brakes were not working so well, and the light of course did not work at all, but it still had a lock, and that at least was working.

From that point on she was conquering the city by bike.

All of the sudden she was not a stupid, displaced foreigner anymore, lost and spurious. Owning a bike made her an insider, made her belong there. Just by locking the bike in front of a bar, she

got rid of the feeling that had been haunting her before, telling her that she was lacking justification to be there. The bike empowered her to go in and order a glass of wine without feeling like a burden to the barkeeper when speaking English, and to spend the evening there, reading or writing.

With the bike, she was able to just stop at a nice shadowy corner of the park, and doze away in the grass for half an hour. The bike would lay next to her like a watchdog, guarding her. Before, she had been carefully avoiding to be seen with her map, because it made her feel like an ignorant tourist. With the bike she was exploring the outskirts and didn't mind anymore to take the map of her backpack whenever she got lost.

I pulled the plug to empty the sink, and she paused. The sound of the dirty water going down the drain filled the sudden silence. I took a towel and leaned against the cupboard. Now I was able to watch her while I started to dry the glasses. She briefly looked at me, then teased out another cigarette, but didn't light it. She carefully observed the cigarette in her hand as she started to speak again.

It happened at the big T-crossing close to the eastern railway station. I also remembered the crossing well, as it used to be on my way to the institute. I had to take the tram no. 6, that, coming from the center, didn't continue to follow the bigger road but took a turn to the right. There was a tram stop right after the crossing, but I still had to go two stops further, almost until the final destination.

She told it was early afternoon and a sunny clear day. She felt good to be outside, to ride quite fast and feel the breeze on her face. She was returning to the center from a trip to the outskirts, so she was coming exactly from the opposite direction than I used to and had to take a left at the crossing. As she was approaching, she saw the lights turn to red. Estimating that she would have to wait, she decided to cross the street she was on already before the tram stop, to ride the last couple of meters on the lefthand sidewalk, and be able to instantly turn at the crossing.

There was a pedestrian crossing right behind the tram stop, or from her point of view, before; it was there she intended to cross. The street behind her was empty. She turned; first she had to cross the right lane, then the tracks, and then the left lane. Everything was free; there was a tram turning from the big street, but it would stop to let the people get out and get in. There was enough time.

Because of the tram standing at the stop she wasn't able to see the car taking the turn from the big street. It must have been trying to still catch the orange light, because it was approaching suddenly and fast in the left lane. When she realized it, it was only a few meters from her, and she knew that it was too late already. She knew the state of her bicycle's brakes, and there was no chance. The only thing she could do was to steer violently to left, and that was why the car hit her only sideways.

Strangely the asphalt didn't even seem hostile, just a bit hard, as it should be.

She picked herself up, slowly, and shakily. She didn't cry; she stood there and looked down at herself in astonishment, still standing, still breathing.

The bike's front wheel was totally bent and the handlebars as well. It was laying next to her like a injured insect that someone had tried to stomp, but only smashed half of.

A helpful, friendly passer-by touched her elbow and let her over to the sidewalk, where the car owner had stopped and got out of the car. He started to talk to her, shocked and worried. He talked quickly in the strange language she didn't understand, and the passer-by joined in. They were asking her something. Unsure about the country's traffic jurisdiction, she was mostly afraid of being responsible, of having caused the accident. She thought of the scratches and bumps on the car, and just repeated "I'm fine. Nothing happened to me, I'm OK." until both of them left.

Then she slowly picked up the bike from the road, leaned it against a pole next to the street and locked it. It felt impossible to join the crowd waiting at the tram stop, so she just walked. Her legs felt like spaghetti, there was a muffled pain in her whole right side, mostly her elbow and her hip, and she sensed an abrasion at the heel of her left hand, but she didn't look at it. Slowly, step by step she walked, like being on autopilot. She walked all the way to the center. She didn't go to the hostel, but straight to the museum she had intended to visit. Nothing happened to me, she thought. If I don't tell it to anyone, nothing happened. On the same day she still wrote a postcard to her parents, telling some details about her ride to the outskirts, and a short email to me, saying that she was missing home. Her flight back was a few days later. She was relieved to return. When people asked, she said it had been alright. Maybe she told a few details about places she had seen and things she had done.

I was still standing next to the sink, the towel and plate I was about to dry forgotten, but still in my hands. Now she looked at me, but I couldn't read the expression on her face. A small shy smile tried to cover something underneath. She finally lit the cigarette, took a breath, and then started to cry.