

Between Shadow and Hope

Angela

A true story

Chapter 1 ½ Born into Unrest

Chapter 1 ½ Born in Turmoil

My name is Angela.

I am 43 years old as I write this.

My story actually begins even before I was born.

My mother drank during her pregnancy with me. Later, I often heard that I would have been born addicted because of that. As a child, of course, I understood nothing of this. I only knew that my childhood was different from that of many other children.

My mother was often lonely.

My father was hardly ever around.

I later found out that he had been in a relationship with another woman for five years. That woman would later become my stepmother. But when I was little, I knew nothing of this.

I only saw a father and a mother.

And I loved both of them.

I also had a brother, Martin.

Martin was ten years older than I was, and to me, he was the big brother who knew everything and could do everything. I looked up to him.

Despite all the problems at home, I loved my family very much.

My first memories are a mix of beautiful and difficult moments.

One of those memories is about a blue bicycle.

I was three years old and wandering in a place where I really shouldn't have been.

There, I saw a beautiful blue bicycle.

I thought that bicycle was amazing.

In my mind, I had probably already decided that it was mine.

As I was fiddling with it, suddenly a garage door slammed down on my finger.

It hurt terribly.

I cried as hard as I could.

Years later, it became a family story.

My nickname became:

Old bike thief.

And honestly, I had to laugh about it myself later on.

But not all memories from that time were funny.

There were also fights.

Many fights.

I remember shouting.

I remember tension.

I remember often being scared without really knowing why.

My brother Martin sometimes got whipped by my father with a belt.

I was still little, but I remember the fear in the house very well.

My mother tried to protect him.

She screamed at my father to stop.

During one of those arguments, my mother was pushed down the stairs.

That image has never left my mind.

When I was four years old, my parents divorced.

For a child, such a thing feels as if the world suddenly changes.

From one day to the next, there were two houses.

Two families.

Two lives.

Shortly thereafter, both my parents remarried.

My mother married Bertus, a quiet truck driver who was almost always cheerful.

My father married the woman he had been in a relationship with for years.

I was just a little girl.

Much of what happened, I didn't understand.

I only knew that I loved both my mother and father.

And that I wanted everyone to be happy again.

That didn't happen.

But as a child, you keep hoping.

Maybe that was my greatest strength.

That despite everything, I kept hoping that it would get better someday.

I didn't yet know how much more would come my way.

I didn't know how often I would have to move.

I didn't know how many people I would lose later.

I didn't know that I would one day write my life story from a forensic psychiatry clinic.

I was just Angela.

A little girl trying to find her place in a world that often felt larger and more difficult than herself.

Chapter 2 ½ Old Bike Thief

****Chapter 2 ½ Old Bike Thief****

My first real memory is colored blue.

Not the blue of the sky on a summer day.

Not the blue of water.

But the blue of a children's bicycle.

A small bike with a shiny handlebar and tires that looked as if they had never seen a muddy trail.

I was three years old.

At least, that's what the stories say.

With memories from that time, you can never be entirely sure.

Sometimes I wonder how much I truly remember and how much I have heard so often that it has now become my own memory.

But that little bike is still clear in my mind.

As if it was yesterday.

It stood in a place where I wasn't allowed to go.

Forbidden territory.

Those were the words adults used.

For children, those words often mean something altogether different.

Forbidden means interesting.

Forbidden means adventure.

Forbidden means that something special is likely to be found there.

And special it certainly was.

There it stood.

In the middle of my small world.

A blue bicycle.

I remember the sun shining on it.

That the handlebar gleamed.

That I stopped to look at it.

It was probably not even a remarkable bike.

Perhaps it was even old.

Maybe it was rusty.

But in my memory, it looked like the most beautiful bike in the Netherlands.

Children think simply.

Maybe I thought:

"What a beautiful bike."

Maybe I thought:

"I want a bike like that."

Or perhaps I thought nothing at all and just walked over because children are

naturally curious.

Before I knew it, I was right by it.

And then it happened.

A heavy garage door slammed shut.

Right on my finger.

The pain came instantly.

The kind of pain that seems to take over your whole body.

I started to cry.

Not a little.

Not a few tears.

No, the kind of crying where a child is completely convinced that the end of the world has arrived.

In hindsight, it must have looked rather comical.

A little girl.

A blue bike.

A swollen finger.

And an enormous amount of drama.

My family certainly found it a wonderful story.

For years, it came up at birthdays.

½Tell us that story about the bike again.½

½Angela always wanted to collect bikes when she was little.½

½Our little bike thief.½

And thus my nickname was born.

Old bike thief.

As a child, I loathed it.

I didn't want to be known as a bike thief.

I wanted to be taken seriously.

Not remembered for a failed attempt to steal a bike when I was three.

But like with many things, that changed later.

As I grew older, I started to laugh about it myself.

Actually, that nickname just belonged to me.

Martin especially loved it.

My brother was ten years older than I was.

When I was three, he was already thirteen.

In my eyes, that was about the same as being grown up.

He enjoyed using my nickname.

Especially when there were visitors.

He would look at me with a grin and say:

½Make sure to keep an eye on your bike.½

Or:

½Lock it up when Angela is around.½

I would get angry.

Or I pretended to be angry.

Because deep down, I found it quite funny as well.

Martin was my hero.

That might sound exaggerated.

But for a little girl, a thirteen-year-old brother is almost a superhero.

He knew things I didn't know.

He could do things I couldn't do.

He was allowed to do things that I certainly wasn't.

I often followed him around.

Not always literally.

But definitely in my mind.

When he liked something, I liked it too.

When he found something funny, I wanted to know why.

When he was enthusiastic about something, so was I.

Perhaps that's what little sisters do.

Perhaps that's part of it.

Not all memories from that time are so light.

I also remember tension.

The atmosphere at home.

The silence before a quarrel began.

The way voices gradually grew louder.

Children may not understand what fights are about.

But they can pinpoint when something is off.

I often already knew how an evening would unfold before a single word was spoken.

From the way a door slammed.

From footsteps on the stairs.

From the way someone set down a cup.

I learned early on to read moods.

Not because anyone taught me.

But because it felt safe to be prepared.

Still, I was just a child.

I played outside.

I collected stones that I thought were special.

I could watch insects in the grass for hours.

I made mud pies.

I chased after pigeons as if I would someday be fast enough to catch one.

Sometimes, I almost forget that.

Because difficult memories often speak louder than the beautiful ones.

But those beautiful moments were there too.

And they deserve a place in my story.

When I think back now to that little girl, I see curiosity.

I see a child who wanted to explore the world.

A child who believed that people were good.

A child who thought that parents could solve everything.

She didn't yet know what was to come.

Not that her parents would divorce.

Not that she would one day walk through London.

Not that she would ever listen to an unknown guitarist in Rome.

Not that Paris would one day become her home for three years.

Not that she would lose people she loved.

She only knew the here and now.

A blue bike.

A painful finger.

A big brother who teased her.

And a nickname that would last her a lifetime.

Old bike thief.

And honestly, I find that to be a lovely nickname now.

Chapter 3 ĩġ½ Martin

Chapter 3 ĩġ½ Martin

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My brother Martin was ten years older than I.

When I was three, he was already thirteen.

To a little girl, that ĩġ½s about the same as being an adult.

He seemed big.

Strong.

Untouchable.

He knew things I didnġ½t know.

He was allowed to do things I wasnġ½t allowed to.

And he could do things I couldnġ½t do yet.

To me, he was a hero.

Not because he was famous.

Not because he did extraordinary things.

Simply because he was my big brother.

That was enough.

I looked up to him.

When Martin laughed at something, I wanted to know why it was funny.

When he listened to music, I wanted to hear what he heard.

When he was angry, I felt that too.

When he was sad, I often noticed it before he said anything.

Maybe because I have always been good at reading people.

Maybe because children in troubled homes learn that faster than other children.

Martin had his own life.

1

His own friends.

His own problems.

But to me, he remained just my brother.

The boy who had always been there.

The boy who called me bicycle thief.

The boy who sometimes teased me and sometimes protected me.

I remember ordinary moments.

And it is those ordinary moments I miss the most now.
Watching television together.
Sitting at the table together.
Laughing at something silly on TV together.
Those kinds of memories seem small.
Until someone is no longer there.
Then those little memories turn out to be worth their weight in gold.
Home was not always calm.
There was tension.
Arguments.
Shouting.
And most of the time, Martin was the one who caught the brunt of it.
He was older.
He had opinions more often.
He stood up for himself more often.
And sometimes that clashed with my father.

2

I remember the tension in the house.
The silence just before an argument began.
My mother worrying.
My father getting angry.
And Martin standing right in the middle of it.
Sometimes Martin got slapped.
I was still small.
Too small to understand why.
I only knew I found it terrible.
I only knew I was scared.
My mother tried to protect us.
She stood up for Martin.
She shouted back.
She refused to stay silent when her children were hurt.
I still admire that about her.
As a little girl, I understood nothing of the reasons behind the arguments.
I only saw my brother.
My big brother.
And I wanted it to stop.
To go back to normal.
Maybe that's what children want most.
Not toys.

3

Not gifts.

But peace.
When my parents got divorced, much changed.
Not just for me, but also for Martin.
Children often carry a divorce in their own way.
Sometimes visibly.
Sometimes invisibly.
The years passed.
Martin grew older.
I grew older.
Our lives changed.
But in my mind, he always remained a bit like that big brother from back then.
And then came the news that no one wants to hear.
Martin died.
Twenty-two years old.
Twenty-two.
That number still feels wrong.
Too small.
Too young.
Too soon.
I remember it felt as if the world stopped for a moment.
4
As if someone had ripped a chapter out of my life.
My big brother was gone.
Just gone.
The strange thing about loss is that the world just keeps going.
People go to work.
Cars drive by.
The sun rises.
The supermarket opens.
As if nothing had happened.
While your world has completely changed.
I remember thinking:
How can the world just keep going while Martin is no longer here?
His room was empty.
His voice was silent.
No more jokes.
No more teasing.
No more "old bicycle thief."
Just silence.
And silence can sometimes hit harder than shouting ever could.
Now, so many years later, I still think of him often.

Sometimes when I hear a song.
Sometimes when I see someone who looks like him.
5
Sometimes for no reason at all.
Out of nowhere.
Then I picture him again.
My big brother.
My hero from back then.
And for a brief moment, it feels like he's still here.
Maybe people never fully disappear.
Maybe they just change places.
From next to you to in your memories.
From a voice in a room to a voice in your head.
What I do know for sure is this:
I have never forgotten him.
And I never will.
Because before Martin became a memory, he was my brother.
And he will always remain that.
6

Chapter 4 ½ The Belt

Chapter 4 ½ The Belt

Some memories have no image.
They have a sound.
A door slamming shut too hard.
Footsteps on the stairs.
A voice that suddenly sounds louder than usual.
A chair scraping across the floor.
I think everyone who grew up in a house filled with arguments recognizes that sound.
That moment when you feel something is about to happen even before it does.
I had surprisingly become good at that as a child.
Perhaps too good.
My father was not always angry.
That is important to say.
Because memories tend to make people into one thing.
But people are almost never one thing.
My father could also laugh.
He could make jokes.
He could be kind.
He could be proud.
He could tell stories.
He could simply be my father.
But he could also become angry.
Very angry.

And when that anger came, it felt as if the temperature in the house changed.
As if the air grew heavier.
As if everyone automatically started speaking softer.
Or completely stopped talking altogether.
Martin usually picked up on that the most.
He was older.

He had an opinion.
He sometimes dared to speak back.
He was no longer a small child who accepted everything.
And that led to clashes.
I don't remember exactly what the arguments were about.
That's strange about memories from your childhood.
You forget the words.
But you remember the feeling.
I remember tension.
I remember fear.
I remember my mother intervening.
I remember Martin getting angry.
And I remember myself.
Small.
Quiet.
Watching.
Waiting for it to be over.

My father sometimes used a belt as punishment.
I understand now that many people will be shocked by that sentence.
For me, it was just something that happened.
Children are strange that way.
They adapt to the world they live in.
They often think their world is the normal world.
I only knew that I found it terrible.
I only knew that I didn't want Martin to be hurt.
I only knew that I wanted everyone to stop shouting.
My mother always stood up for him.
Always.
She shouted back.
She intervened.
She defended her children.
I have always admired her for that.
During one of those arguments, my mother was pushed down the stairs.
That image has never left me.
Not because I still remember every detail.
But because some moments embed themselves in your memory.
As if your mind decides:
You must never forget this.
I still remember being scared.

Really scared.
Not the fear of monsters under the bed.
Not the fear of the dark.
But the fear that adults suddenly feel unsafe.
Maybe that was the first time I realized that grown-ups couldn't solve everything.
That parents make mistakes.
Sometimes big mistakes.
Children often think their parents know everything.
That they are strong.
That they have everything under control.
The moment you discover that this isn't always true changes something.
I started reading people at a young age.
I often knew how an evening would unfold before a single word was spoken.
From a glance.
From a sigh.
From a door.
From silence.
Especially silence.
That vigilance would stay with me for a long time.
In relationships.
In friendships.
On the street.

Even years later, I sometimes noticed that I scanned rooms automatically when I entered somewhere.
Who is angry?
Who is sad?
Who is safe?
Who isn't?
You don't learn that at school.
You learn that at home.
And yet I loved my father.
That may sound contradictory.
But love is often more complicated than people think.
He was my father.
That never changed.
I later learned that you can love someone and at the same time be hurt by that person.
Those two things can exist side by side.
No matter how difficult that sometimes is.
The arguments became worse.

My parents grew apart.
I felt that without really understanding it.
I only felt that something was breaking.
Something that couldn't be fixed anymore.
When I was four years old, my parents divorced.
I remember not fully understanding what that meant.

Divorce was a big word for a small girl.
I only knew that Dad no longer lived at home.
That Mom was sad.
And that nothing felt the same anymore.
Adults often say:
Children are resilient.
That is true.
But children also remember much more than adults sometimes think.
I mostly remember the feeling.
The feeling that the ground under my feet had suddenly become less stable.
As if the world I knew was slowly falling apart.
I didn't yet know that this was only the beginning.
That more goodbyes would follow.
More loss.
More moves.
More fresh starts.
But somewhere amidst all the chaos was also a small girl who kept hoping.
That her parents might get back together.
That everyone would laugh again.
That everything would return to normal.
Children are good at hoping.
Maybe better than adults.
Maybe that hope ultimately helped me through more than I will ever know.

Chapter 5 İ̇½ Two Houses

Chapter 5 İ̇½ Two Houses

After the separation, everything changed.

Not suddenly.

Not from one day to the next.

But slowly enough to only realize it had happened when it was already done.

First, there were suddenly boxes in the house.

Then things began to disappear.

Then, there was whispering when I walked in.

And finally, there was suddenly one house less.

Or rather, one home less.

I was four years old.

Four-year-olds don't understand separations.

They don't understand what a marriage is.

They don't understand what cheating means.

They don't understand why people who once loved each other suddenly can't look at each other.

They only understand that daddy is gone.

My father moved on with the woman he had been in a relationship with for years.

She became my stepmother.

Just the word felt strange to me.

Stepmother.

As if someone suddenly got a new role in a story I hadn't asked to be part of.

My mother also found love again.

Bertus.

A calm truck driver.

A man with big hands, a quiet voice, and a smile you didn't have to trust, because it felt familiar all by itself.

For the first time, I experienced that a man could also be silent without that silence feeling dangerous.

That may sound strange.

But there are different kinds of silence.

There is the silence before a quarrel.
And then there is the silence of peace.
Bertus belonged to that second kind.
My father lived somewhere else.
My mother lived somewhere else.
And I suddenly belonged to both,
And at times, to neither.
I got two homes.
Two front doors.
Two kitchens.
Two sets of rules.
Two worlds.
With my mother, it felt different from my father.
Not better or worse.
Different.

With my mother, there was Bertus.
The smell of coffee.
Stories about trucks.
The sound of a television playing softly in the background.
The calm of ordinary days.
With my father, I often felt more cautious.
As if I always had to gauge the mood before I knew who I had to be that day.
Perhaps many children of divorced parents recognize that feeling.
That you have different versions of yourself.
One version for here.
One version for there.
And somewhere in between, the real version that doesn't quite know where it
belongs.
I didn't want to disappoint anyone.
Not my mother.
Not my father.
Not Bertus.
Not my stepmother.
I wanted everyone to be happy.
As if that were the task of a child.
Sometimes I wouldn't tell my mother what I had done at my father's.
And at my father's, I didn't always share what I had done at my mother's.
Not because I was lying.

But because I didn't want to bring anyone sadness.

I didn't want to take sides.
I just wanted to love everyone.
The adult world turned out to be more complicated than the world of children.
Much more complicated.
Yet, there were also beautiful moments.
Sometimes I almost forget them when I think back to the past.
But they really existed.
Birthdays.
Summer days.
Watching TV together.
Eating together.
Laughing at something silly.
Ordinary things.
Perhaps ordinary things are ultimately the most special.
Precisely because you only realize how valuable they were when they're gone.
I slowly began to understand that my life had changed.
Not worse, perhaps.
But different.
And for a child, different can sometimes be difficult enough.
I think I started adapting during those years.
With watching.
With feeling.
With trying to keep everyone satisfied.
That is exhausting for an adult.
Let alone for a little girl.
Yet I did it.
Because children are often much stronger than people think.
And sometimes also much lonelier.
When I think back to that time now, I see a girl with a small bag in her hand.
On her way from one house to another.
Not quite here.
Not quite there.
But always on the way.
Perhaps my life between worlds began there.
Between houses.
Between people.
Between departing and returning.
I didn't yet know that I would later travel across half of Europe.
That I would see London.
Rome.
Paris.

That I would be on the road for years.

Perhaps that feeling of being on the way did not start in a train or airplane.

Maybe it began when I was four years old.

With two houses.

And a little girl wondering where home actually was.

Chapter 6 ½ Bertus

Chapter 6 ½ Bertus

Some people walk into a room and you immediately sense who they are.
Not by what they say.
But by how they look.
How they walk.
How they can be silent without that silence becoming heavy.
Bertus was one of those people.

When my mother met him, I was still young.
Young enough not to fully grasp what being in love meant.
But old enough to see that my mother looked different when he was around.
Calmer.
Lighter, perhaps.
As if she momentarily forgot how tired she really was.

Bertus was a truck driver.
To me, that sounded like one of the most exciting jobs in the world.
While other kids dreamed of becoming firefighters or pilots, I found truck drivers impressive.
They traveled everywhere.
Saw places I only knew from maps.
Sometimes slept hundreds of kilometers from home.
For a child, that was adventure.

When Bertus came home from his trips, he often smelled of coffee, diesel, and fresh outdoor air.
I still think of that scent sometimes.
It's strange how memories work.
Sometimes you forget entire years.
And sometimes the smell of a coat stays with you for a lifetime.

He told stories about Germany.
About France.
About parking lots full of trucks.
About drivers helping each other on the road.
I hung on his every word.
For me, they were tales from another world.

What I perhaps found most remarkable was his calmness.
He did not shout.
He did not slam doors.
He didn't walk through the house in anger.
He was just...
calm.

That might sound small.
But to me, it felt huge.
Very huge.

I think I discovered for the first time that a man didn't always have to be loud to be strong.
That someone didn't have to become angry to be heard.
That safety sometimes simply means being able to relax without realizing it.

With Bertus, I didn't have to constantly monitor how someone was feeling.
Didn't need to read the mood in a room.
I could just be a kid.

Sometimes he sat at the table drinking coffee while the radio played softly.
My mother moved through the house.
I played somewhere on the floor.
And for a moment, everything felt normal.
Just normal.

Those might be the memories I cherish the most.
Not the big events.
But the ordinary days.
The days when nothing happened.
Because those days were so rare.

I remember my mother laughing more during that time.
Not always.

But more often.
And when your mother laughs, the world feels safer instinctively as a child.

I believe Bertus meant a lot to her.
Perhaps even more than he ever knew.

He never tried to replace my father.
I am still grateful for that.
He was just Bertus.
That was enough.

Sometimes I would sit by the window watching as his truck came down the street.
I knew exactly how it sounded.
I knew exactly what time he would be home.
Those small certainties are important for children.
They provide stability.

Perhaps Bertus was that stability for me.
Not because he did great things.
But precisely because he did not.

But life had other plans.
It often does.
Just when I began to believe that calm could last, everything changed once more.

My mother got sick.
Seriously sick.
I remember the conversations that stopped when I entered a room.
The looks from adults.
The silence at the table.
The whispers.

Children often don't hear what is being said.
But they feel exactly what is not being said.

I didn't know exactly what was going on.
I only knew that I was afraid.
Afraid of losing my mother.

For a child, a mother is often the place where the world feels safe.
The idea that this place might disappear was unbearable.

There was talk of hospitals.
Of examinations.
Of needing to rest.
Words I didn't understand at the time.
But fear doesn't need words to be felt.

One day I heard I had to live somewhere else temporarily.
First with my godmother.
Later with my father and stepmother.
Until my mother got better.

Temporarily.
That word sounds short when adults say it.
For a child, temporarily can feel like forever.

I still remember packing my things.
Not much.
A few clothes.
Some small things that were mine.
Maybe a stuffed animal.
I'm not sure about that anymore.
What I do know is that I didn't want to go.
I wanted to stay with my mother.
I wanted to stay with Bertus.
I wanted to stay home.

But sometimes children don't get a choice.
They go where adults say they must go.
And hope that everything will be alright again.

When I heard the door close behind me, I still didn't know that the coming period
would be one of the most difficult of my childhood.
I only knew that I was leaving my mother behind.
And that felt like leaving a piece of myself behind.

Chapter 7 ĩ½ Away from Home

Chapter 7 ĩ½ Away from Home

I canĳt remember exactly how old I was when I had to pack my things.
Young enough to still sleep with a stuffed animal.
Old enough to be scared.
My mother was sick.
Seriously sick.
Adults used words that I didnĳt quite understand.
Hospital.
Examinations.
Rest.
Waiting.
Words that have meaning for grown-ups, but for children sound mostly like bad news.
I remember that my mother looked tired.
More tired than usual.
Not ordinary tiredness.
Not the kind of tiredness that goes away after a nightĳs sleep.
A deeper tiredness.
As if her body was slowly fighting a battle I didnĳt understand.
I was scared.
Not because someone told me I should be scared.
But because children can feel when the world of adults starts to shake.
At first, I went to my godmother.

I knew her, of course.
But knowing someone and living somewhere are two very different things.
I especially remember the feeling of not really belonging there.
As if I were a guest who overstayed their welcome.
Maybe that wasnĳt the intent.
Maybe it was all in my head.
But thatĳs how it felt.

Children quickly sense when they are welcome.
And perhaps even quicker when they are not.
I tried to be as little trouble as possible.
I tidied up my things.
I made myself small.
I tried to become invisible.
That is something I would do more often later.
To shrink away.
Not to stand out.
Not to cause trouble.
After a while, I moved again.
This time to my father and stepmother.
There was also my stepbrother living there.
And sometimes my brother Martin.

I had hoped it would be easier.
It wasn't.
The house didn't feel like my home.
My room didn't feel like my room.
My life didn't feel like my life.
I missed my mother.
Every day.
I wondered how she was doing.
If she was thinking of me.
If she was getting better.
If I could go home soon.
There was a lot of talk about my mother.
Not always positive.
I found that difficult.
Because I loved her.
Still do.
Always will.
As a child, you don't want to have to choose between the people you love.
But sometimes it felt like I had to choose.
As if love had to be divided.
As if there were winners and losers.
I didn't know how to deal with that.

So, I did what I often did.
I kept my mouth shut.
I started keeping more things to myself.

My sorrow.
My fear.
My questions.
Maybe that's where my habit of carrying everything alone began.
Sometimes I would sit in my room and look out the window.
I imagined my mother was better.
That I was back home.
That everything was normal again.
Children are good at fantasizing.
Thank goodness.
Sometimes, fantasy is the only place where you can rest for a moment.
I missed Bertus too.
His calm voice.
His stories about the truck.
The ordinary days.
The safety I felt with him.
With my father, I often felt cautious.
Not always.

But often enough.
As if I had to first sense the mood before I knew who I had to be that day.
That may sound strange.
But many children from difficult families will recognize it.
You learn to read faces.
To read voices.
To read silences.
You learn to predict.
Not because you want to.
But because it feels safe to be prepared.
I became good at it.
Maybe too good.
And then finally came the news I had been waiting so long for.
My mother was getting better.
I could go home again.
I still remember how relieved I was.
Truly relieved.
As if I could finally exhale after months of holding my breath.
When I saw her again, all I wanted was to hold her.
Just to know she was still there.
That she hadn't disappeared.

For a child, home is sometimes not a house.
Not a street.
Not a bedroom.
Sometimes home is just one person.
For me, that was my mother.
When I returned to live with her and Bertus, it felt like the world was settling a bit
back into place.
Not perfect.
Not carefree.
But better.
Much better.
Yet something had changed.
I felt it.
Even if I couldn't explain it then.
I had learned that people can get sick.
That people can disappear.
That home is not a given.
That safety can be temporary.
Those are big lessons for a little girl.
Maybe too big.
But from that moment on, I carried them with me.
Invisible.
As children often do.

When I look back now, I see a girl who was mostly tired of saying goodbye.
Tired of moving.
Tired of waiting.
Tired of being scared.
But I also see a girl who kept hoping.
That her mother would get better.
That everything would be alright.
That the world would eventually turn out to be a safe place.
Maybe it was that hope that accompanied me throughout my life.
Even in moments when I thought I had lost it.
It was still there.
Sometimes very small.
But always present.
Waiting until I needed it again.

Chapter 8 ½ Never Quite at Home

****Chapter 8 ½ Never Quite at Home****

When I moved back in with my mother and Bertus, I thought everything would return to normal. Children often think that difficult periods have a clear end. That a day will come when everything will be like it used to be. But that's not how life usually works. Some things fade away. Other things quietly continue to accompany you.

I went back to school. I played outside again. From the outside, my life probably looked quite normal. But inside, I felt different than before. More cautious. As if a part of me was always on the lookout. I was getting better at adapting. With my mother, I was different than with my father. At school, I was again different. With friends, different again. It was as if I had a different version of myself for every place. I think many children from difficult families can relate to this. You learn to see what people expect of you. And then you try to become that.

At school, I wasn't the girl who caused a lot of trouble. I first watched and waited. I observed. Who belongs with whom? Who is nice? Who can you trust? Perhaps I had been doing this longer than I realized. Maybe I had started it at home. Sometimes I felt older than other children. As if I knew things I shouldn't have had to know yet. That adults don't always stay. That houses can change. That safety is not a given. Because of this, I sometimes felt different. Not better. Not worse. Just different.

I often looked at other families. Families that shopped together. Went on vacation together. Sat around the table together. And I wondered if it really was as calm there as it seemed. Maybe children idealize other families. Maybe adults do too. Meanwhile, I kept moving. Not always literally from house to house. But rather between worlds. Between my mother and my father. Between expectations. Between different versions of myself. The feeling of being in transit slowly began to become a part of me. As if I didn't belong completely anywhere. But also not completely nowhere.

I think that feeling played a significant role in my life later on. Maybe that's why traveling attracted me so much. Maybe that's why London, Rome, and Paris felt so natural to me later. I had known being on the road for much longer. There were also beautiful moments. Friends. Laughter on the playground. Summer days that seemed to last forever. Biking without a destination. It's important not to lose those memories. Because my childhood didn't consist solely of difficult things. There were also ordinary days. And ordinary days can sometimes be very special.

Still, there was an underlying restlessness within me. A feeling I couldn't quite explain. As if I was constantly waiting for bad news. As if I never really dared to believe that something good would last. That feeling would often return later. In relationships. In friendships. In loss. In farewells. But back then, I didn't know that yet. Back then, I was just Angela. A girl trying to find her place. A girl who hoped people would be kind to one another. A girl who hoped tomorrow might be a little easier than today. And honestly, I think I'm still a bit that girl.

Chapter 9 ½ The Teenage Years

****Chapter 9 - The Teenage Years****

My teenage years did not come slowly.

They arrived all at once.

As if someone decided one morning that I was no longer a child.

Yet I didn't feel mature at all.

I felt mostly uncertain.

At school, everything started to matter more.

Friendships.

Cliques.

Who was popular.

Who belonged.

Who didn't.

Such things seem small later on.

But when you're a teenager, they are enormous.

Sometimes I was included.

And sometimes not.

It fluctuated a bit.

I was never the loudest girl in class.

Never the one at the center of everything.

I preferred to observe how people were first.

I had been doing that my whole life, really.

I had become good at reading people.

Maybe too good.

I often sensed someone's feelings just by looking at their face.

I heard it in a voice.

I saw it in a glance.

Sometimes it felt like I was constantly tuned in.

Always scanning.

Always paying attention.

That's exhausting.

But when you grow up with it, you don't even notice anymore.

It just becomes normal.

I started listening to more music.
A lot of music.
Music was more honest than people.
Music didn't ask questions.
Music didn't judge.
Music just was.
Some songs felt like someone understood exactly what I couldn't explain myself.
Sadness.
Confusion.
Loneliness.
Hope.
Everything was hidden somewhere in the music.
I dreamed a lot.
About traveling.
About freedom.
About a life where I would finally find peace.
Sometimes I imagined living somewhere different later on.
Another city.
Another country, perhaps.
A place where no one knew my past.
Where I could start anew.
That idea felt comforting.
As if there was a place in the world where everything would be easier.
Maybe many young people dream of that.
Maybe I just needed it a bit more.
I fell in love.
Like almost everyone does at some point.
With butterflies in my stomach.
With sleepless nights.
With hours spent pondering conversations that only lasted five minutes.
Falling in love is beautiful.
But it's also dangerous.
Especially when you crave to be seen so much that you forget to listen to yourself.
In the beginning, everything seemed lovely.
As it often does.
You mostly see the good.
You see mostly what you hope to see.
Slowly, things changed.
First small things.
Then bigger things.
Anger.

Control.

Jealousy.

Fury.

At first, you look for excuses.

Hei̇½s having a tough day.

He doesni̇½t mean it like that.

It will be fine.

But some things doni̇½t get better.

Some things only grow larger.

I began to lose myself.

To become more cautious.

To shrink.

To be preoccupied with reading moods again.

With predicting.

With trying to prevent arguments before they started.

And suddenly, I realized something terrible.

I already knew this feeling.

Not exactly the same.

But I recognized the emotion.

The feeling of walking on tiptoes.

The feeling of tension in the house.

The feeling of not knowing which version of someone you had before you that day.

That was the moment I began to understand that I needed to leave.

Not tomorrow.

Not next month.

Now.

I didni̇½t make that decision all at once.

People sometimes think that leaving is one moment.

Closing a door.

Packing a bag.

But usually, leaving starts much earlier.

In silence.

In doubt.

In sleepless nights.

Until one day something changes.

A small moment.

A thought.

A feeling.

And you know:

I cani̇½t stay here.

I was nineteen years old.

I had no grand plan.
No stack of money.
No certainty.
Just a huge desire to leave.
In retrospect, I think I wasn't just running away from someone.
I was also running towards something.
Perhaps freedom.
Peace.
Or just breathing space.
At that time, I didn't know that this decision would take me to London.
To Hyde Park.
To Rome.
To Paris.
And ultimately back to the Netherlands.
But that story still had to begin.
At that moment, I was just a nineteen-year-old girl.
With a bag.
A head full of questions.
And a life on the brink of complete change.

Chapter 10 ½ The Escape

Chapter 10 ½ The Escape

The morning I left felt strange.

Not like an adventure.

Not like a vacation.

And definitely not like freedom.

Not yet.

It primarily felt like I had no other choice.

I was nineteen years old.

Nineteen is an age when many people study, go out, or make plans for the future.

I was mostly focused on getting away.

I had no large suitcase.

No detailed plan.

No set route.

Only the feeling that I had to leave before I completely lost myself.

The last weeks before my departure had been tough.

I slept poorly.

I thought a lot.

Maybe too much.

Repeating the same questions over and over.

Stay?

Or go?

Try one more time?

Or accept that some things won't get better?

At some point, there comes a time when you no longer choose between good and bad.

But between bad and something that might be better.

That was the moment I left.

I remember looking back.

Not for long.

Just a moment.

Because saying goodbye always feels strange.

Even when you're bidding farewell to something that causes you pain.
People often think that leaving brings relief.
Sometimes that's true.
But sometimes leaving also hurts.
Because you're saying goodbye to what could have been.
To expectations.
To dreams.
To plans that never became reality.
During the journey, for the first time in a long while, I felt something that resembled
peace.
Not true peace.
More like breathing space.
As if finally, oxygen was coming back into my life.
I looked out the window.
Houses became smaller.
Cities vanished behind me.
Kilometers piled up.
And somewhere, that felt good.
For the first time in a long while, I no longer had to be on high alert.
No longer waiting for an argument.
No longer predicting how someone would feel.
No longer worrying about what I might do wrong.
Just that felt like freedom.
During that time, I listened to a lot of music.
More than ever, perhaps.
Music had become my travel companion.
My thoughts were drowned out by guitars, voices, and lyrics from people I had never
met.
And yet sometimes, they understood me better than the people around me.
There was one band I listened to extensively.
Their music had been there during difficult times.
During sleepless nights.
During days when I didn't know how to move forward.
Sometimes music feels like someone opens a window in a room where you've been
without air for years.
That was that band for me.
Through a truck driver, I unexpectedly received a VIP ticket for a concert in London.

Even now, that sounds like something out of a movie.
A truck driver.
A VIP ticket.

London.

It didn't really fit into my life.

And maybe that's exactly why it felt so special.

I decided to go.

Not because I knew what I would do next.

But because I finally wanted to say "yes" to something beautiful.

Maybe that was my first real step towards freedom.

Not the act of running away itself.

But daring to believe that there were still beautiful things waiting for me somewhere.

When I first saw the London skyline, I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Curiosity.

Excitement.

Anticipation.

Maybe this was the beginning of something new.

Maybe not.

But for the first time in a long time, that didn't matter.

I was on my way.

Really on my way.

And for someone who had lived her whole life among houses, people, and memories, that felt strangely familiar.

I didn't know that London would change my life.

I didn't know that Hyde Park would become a memory I would carry with me decades later.

I didn't know that Rome and Paris were still waiting for me.

I only knew this:

I was gone.

I was still alive.

And for the first time in a long time, that felt like something to be grateful for.

Chapter 11 ½ London

****Chapter 11 ½ London****

London smelled different than the Netherlands.

That was perhaps the first thing I noticed.

A blend of rain, exhaust fumes, coffee, and thousands of people who all seemed to be headed somewhere.

Everything was moving.

Cars.

Buses.

People.

Even the air seemed to be moving faster than at home.

I stood still for a moment when I arrived.

Just to look.

At the red double-deckers.

The black taxis.

The people conversing in all sorts of languages.

For the first time in a long while, I didn't feel trapped.

I felt small.

But in a good way.

In a big city, you are just one face among millions.

No one knows your history.

No one knows your mistakes.

No one knows what you fled from.

That, strangely enough, felt safe.

I wandered through the city for hours.

Not because I had to be somewhere.

But because I was finally curious again.

Curious about buildings.

About people.

About street musicians.

About the world.

I looked up at buildings older than anything I knew.
I listened to languages I didn't understand.
I bought cheap coffee that was far too hot.
And for the first time in years, I felt a bit alive.
The concert was drawing closer.
I thought about it constantly.
Perhaps because music had been my refuge for so long.
Perhaps because this felt more like a reward than a concert.
I had a VIP ticket.
Even now it sounds strange.
Me, Angela, from the Netherlands.
With a VIP ticket in London.
Sometimes things happen that don't seem to fit with the life you've had up until then.

On the morning of the concert, I woke up early.
Far too early, actually.
I was nervous.
Like children are nervous for a school trip.
Or for Christmas.
I remember looking out the window.
London was slowly waking up.
People hurried to work again.
Taxis were driving to and fro.
The city never really slept.
I tried to eat.
That was hardly successful.
My stomach was full of tension.
And expectation.
Later that day, I set off for Hyde Park.
Just the name felt special.
Hyde Park.
A place where so many people had walked.
So many stories had begun.
And today, I was walking there too.
The closer I got to the venue, the more people I saw.
People in band shirts.
People laughing.
People feeling the same excitement as I was.

For the first time in a long while, I felt part of something.

Not alone.
Not foreign.
Not different.
Just one of many.
I remember the sound of voices.
Of beer cups clinking together.
Of music being tested somewhere in the distance.
Of a crowd waiting for something beautiful.
And then I entered Hyde Park.
The grass.
The trees.
The enormous open space.
The sea of people.
I paused for a moment.
Just to take it all in.
I thought about home.
About everything I had left behind.
About how small my world had sometimes felt.
And suddenly I was here.
In London.
Amidst thousands of people.

It felt unreal.
As if I had momentarily stepped into someone else's life.
The sun broke through the clouds.
People began to cheer.
Something was happening on stage.
Technicians were moving back and forth.
Everyone knew: it was about to begin.
My heart started to race.
Not from fear.
But from excitement.
From joy.
I think at that moment, for the first time in years, I was completely living in the here and now.
Not thinking about yesterday.
Not afraid of tomorrow.
Just there.
Just that moment.
Perhaps that's what music sometimes does.
It gives you back to yourself for a moment.

Then the lights came on.
The first notes echoed.
And the crowd began to move.

And for the first time in a very long time, I felt something I had almost forgotten.
Happiness.
Real happiness.
Not grand.
Not perfect.
But real.
And that feeling, I would never forget.

Chapter 12 ĩġ ½ Hyde Park

****Chapter 12 ĩġ ½ Hyde Park****

The strange thing about beautiful moments is that you often feel, even while they are happening, that you will never forget them.

I felt that there.

In the middle of Hyde Park.

Among thousands of strangers.

Under a London sky that couldn't decide between sun and clouds.

The first notes sounded across the grounds.

The sound rolled like a wave through the crowd.

Thousands of people cheered at once.

I felt it literally in my chest.

Not just hearing.

Feeling.

I looked around.

People were laughing.

People were singing.

People had their eyes closed as if they were somewhere other than London.

Maybe they were.

Music sometimes takes people to places where words cannot reach.

It was no different for me.

The music brought memories with it.

Difficult memories.

But also good ones.

I thought of my mother.

Of Martin.

Of the little girl with the blue bicycle.

Of all the versions of myself that I had been along the way.

And yet it didn't feel sad.

Not that evening.

That evening everything felt light.

The stage seemed gigantic.

Lights danced through the air.
The audience moved along to the music.
And for a moment it felt like thousands of people were breathing together.
What I remember most is the feeling of freedom.
That I didn't have to be afraid of anything.
That no one expected anything from me.
That I didn't have to go anywhere.
I didn't have to be strong.
Not careful.
Not watch my words.
I was allowed to simply exist.
That may sound small.
But for me, it felt enormous.

Sometimes I think freedom doesn't mean you can do what you want.
Maybe freedom simply means that you aren't afraid for a moment.
I still remember looking up at the evening sky.
That the first lights came on.
That the city slowly changed from day to night.
The music got louder.
The audience began to sing louder.
Even people who didn't know each other wrapped their arms around one another.
For a few hours, there was no past.
No future.
Only music.
I sang along.
Probably not beautifully.
But that didn't matter.
Nobody was listening to me.
Everyone was listening to the same thing.
Perhaps that was the most beautiful part of that evening.
That for the first time in a long time, I felt no different from others.
Not damaged.
Not lost.
Not alone.
Just someone among thousands of others.

Sometimes one evening can do more than years of explanations.
That evening gave me back something I had lost along the way.
The feeling that the world was bigger than my problems.
That there were still beautiful things.

That life wasn't just about loss.
When the last song began, everyone knew it.
This was the end.
You could feel it in the atmosphere.
In the silence between the notes.
In the way people tried to hold on to each moment.
I remember thinking:
Not yet.
One more song.
Five more minutes.
Just a little longer.
But beautiful things sometimes end precisely because they are beautiful.
When the final notes faded, the crowd stood still for a moment longer.
As if no one wanted to be the first to admit it was over.
Slowly people began to walk away.
Groups of friends disappeared toward the exit.
Laughing.
Talking.

Talking about what they had just seen.
I stayed back for a moment.
Alone.
Looking at a stage that was slowly dimming.
Maybe I wasn't just saying goodbye to a concert.
Maybe I was saying goodbye to a version of myself.
The version that had only been focused on surviving.
That evening felt like a beginning.
Not of a solution.
Not of a happy ending.
But of a possibility.
When I finally left Hyde Park, London had changed.
Or maybe I had changed.
The streets had grown dark.
Lights reflected in wet asphalt.
Taxis drove by.
People laughed outside cafés.
The city continued as if nothing extraordinary had happened.
But for me, something had occurred.
Something small perhaps.
Something invisible.

But real.

For the first time in years, I believed again that my life could be bigger than my past.

That idea was new.

And honestly, a little scary.

But it was there.

I walked through the London night with the sound of the music still in my head.

And for the first time in a long time, I didn't look back.

I looked ahead.

Even though I didn't yet know where to.

A few days later, I would be heading to Italy.

To Rome.

To heat.

To street musicians.

To a man with a guitar I would never forget.

But I didn't know that then.

I only knew that Hyde Park would always remain a part of me.

And it still is.

Chapter 13 ½ The Road to Rome

****Chapter 13 ½ The Road to Rome****

After London, it felt as if I could breathe again.

Not because my problems had vanished.

They were still packed in my suitcase, somewhere between my clothes and memories.

Problems travel easily.

But something had changed anyway.

The world felt larger.

And I felt smaller.

In a pleasant way.

I had no strict plan.

No agenda.

No travel book.

Only a direction.

South.

Deeper into Europe.

Further away from everything I had left behind.

I remember stations.

Many stations.

Departure boards.

People with suitcases.

People belonging somewhere.

People picked up by family or friends.

I often watched them.

Not out of jealousy.

More out of curiosity.

What would it feel like?

To have someone waiting for you.

To have a place where you are always welcome.

On the road, I looked out the window a lot.

Landscapes changed slowly.

Cities gave way to fields.

Fields made room for mountains.
And somewhere along the way, I noticed that my shoulders were less tense.
For the first time in a long while, I didn't have to be constantly alert.
No arguments.
No tension.
No doors slamming shut too hard.
Only the sound of wheels on rails and unknown voices at stations.
There's something comforting about traveling.
No one expects anything from you.
No one asks who you were yesterday.
No one knows your history.
You're just someone who is on the move.
Perhaps that's why I loved traveling so much.
Maybe because I had felt like I was always on the road.

When I finally entered Italy, the light changed.
That sounds strange.
But it's true.
The light seemed warmer.
Softer.
As if the sun was closer.
I looked at hills.
At small villages.
At laundry hanging out to dry.
Everything felt different from home.
And that's what I loved.
When I saw Rome for the first time, I didn't quite know how to feel.
The city was enormous.
Busy.
Loud.
Alive.
Scooters zipped by cars as if traffic rules were merely suggestions.
People talked loudly.
Terraces were packed.
Voices were everywhere.
Laughing people.
Chatting people.
Living people.

I felt both very alone and completely not alone at the same time.
A strange feeling.

But a beautiful feeling.
Rome smelled of coffee.
Of stone holding the warmth of the day.
Of food from little restaurants where people lingered for hours at tables.
I walked for hours through the city.
Past buildings older than my entire country.
Past fountains.
Past churches.
Past people in a hurry while I, for the first time in a long time, had nowhere to be.
That might have been the greatest gift of that trip.
Time.
No obligations.
No expectations.
No future that needed to be solved today.
Only this day.
Only this street.
Only this city.
The heatwave began shortly after my arrival.
Even at night, the warmth lingered between the buildings.

The stones radiated heat as if they didn't want to let go of the sun.
During the day, everyone sought shade.
Fountains became meeting places.
Water became more important than coffee.
And slowly I began to realize that I would probably stay longer than I had initially thought.
I had little money.
But strangely enough, that didn't feel like a disaster.
I had enough to eat.
Enough to drink.
And a city full of stories to wander through.
Sometimes I bought a panini.
Sometimes an ice cream.
Sometimes both when I felt rich.
I started to recognize faces.
People I encountered more often.
Street musicians.
Vendors.
Other travelers.
The city gradually became less strange.
And then, on a warm evening that began like so many other evenings, I met a group

of people who would forever change my memory of Rome.
Among them was a man with a guitar.

A man whose music would linger in my mind for years to come.
Even though I never knew his name.
Some people stay in your life without ever really entering it.
Maybe he was one of those.

Chapter 14 ½ The Heatwave

****Chapter 14 ½ The Heatwave****

The summer in Rome was unlike anything I knew.

Not just warm.

Not a few degrees too much.

It was the sort of heat that enveloped everything.

In the streets.

In the buildings.

In the air.

Even the nights felt warm.

As if the city itself refused to let go of the sun.

During the day, people sought shade.

Terraces filled up only late in the evening.

Fountains became gathering places.

Water became more important than food.

I walked a lot.

Perhaps too much.

But walking was free.

And besides, you truly get to know a city when you discover it on foot.

I walked past ancient buildings that had stood there long before the Netherlands existed.

Past churches.

Past squares.

Past street musicians playing for tourists in a rush.

Sometimes I would sit somewhere just to watch.

Watching people.

Watching conversations in languages I didn't understand.

Watching children running after pigeons.

Watching older folks sitting for hours on benches as if they had all the time in the world.

I began to love Rome.

Not because it was perfect.

But because it was alive.

I had little money.

That didn't change.

My days often consisted of simple things.

A panini.

A bottle of water.

An ice cream when I treated myself to a little extra.

It might sound poor.

But it didn't always feel that way.

Sometimes it felt like I needed less than I had ever thought.

I began to recognize people.

An old man who read the same newspaper every morning.

A woman selling flowers.

A street musician who played almost every evening in the same spot.

A city becomes home only when you start recognizing faces.

Perhaps that happened slowly for me and Rome.

Meanwhile, the heat just kept going.

The stones of the buildings held onto the warmth.

Even in the middle of the night, it felt as if the day hadn't quite ended.

One evening, I walked through the city without a real destination.

I often did that.

I let my feet decide where I ended up.

This time, I found myself among a group of travelers and gypsies.

People living from day to day.

People who, like me, seemed to be on the road.

I knew no one.

They didn't know me.

And yet, I was allowed to stay.

I found that remarkable.

Sometimes strangers are surprisingly kind.

There was talking.

Laughter.

Food shared.

Stories told.

Not everyone spoke the same language.

But oddly enough, that didn't seem to matter.

There are moments when people understand each other without needing many words.

This was one of those moments.

The evening gradually turned to night.

The warmth lingered between the buildings.

And somewhere, a guitar appeared.

A man picked up the instrument as if it were an extension of himself.

Not as if he was going to perform.

Not as if he wanted to impress anyone.

Just as if music were the most natural thing in the world.

Then he began to play.

I no longer remember what song it was.

I don't even know if it was a known piece.

But I still know exactly how it felt.

The conversations softened.

People listened.

Even the city seemed to grow quieter for a moment.

He didn't just play music.

He told stories without words.

Stories of love.

Of loss.

Of longing.

Of freedom.

Perhaps I heard mostly my own stories in there.

Maybe that's what music does.

I sat there and listened.

And for the first time in a long while, I thought of nothing.

Not of home.

Not of the past.

Not of the future.

Just that moment.

Some memories are significant because something important happened.

Other memories are significant because you were completely happy for a moment

without realizing it.

This was one of those memories.

I never knew his name.

Perhaps I never asked.

Maybe I found it beautiful that not everything needed a name.

Sometimes people are chapters.

Sometimes people are just a single page.

But even a single page can last a lifetime.

That night stayed with me for a long time.

Not because of the heat.

Not because of Rome.

But because of the feeling.

The feeling that the world sometimes gives unexpected beautiful moments to people who need them badly.

I didn't yet know that Paris was waiting for me.

That the most beautiful summers also come to an end.

That freedom and loneliness sometimes lie surprisingly close to each other.

I only knew that I was sitting there.

In Rome.

Under a warm night sky.

Listening to a guitar that would play in my memories for years to come.

Chapter 15 $i\frac{1}{2}$ The Man with the Guitar

Chapter 15 $i\frac{1}{2}$ The Man with the Guitar

Some people disappear from your life before you even know their last name. Sometimes even before you know their first name. And yet, they stay with you for years. The man with the guitar was such a person.

The evening after our first meeting, I almost automatically walked back to the same spot. Not because we had arranged to meet. Not because I knew he would be there. But because some places can feel familiar after just one night.

Rome was still warm. Even when the sun had long set, the heat lingered between the buildings. The stones held onto the warmth as if they were afraid of losing summer.

As I approached, I could already hear the guitar. Not loud. Not intrusive. More like the music had casually drifted into the air.

He was there again. With the same guitar. The same calm demeanor. As if he had nowhere to rush to. As if time meant something entirely different to him than it did to the rest of the world.

I sat down. Not too close. Not too far away. Just close enough to listen.

He played without announcement. Without applause. Without seeking an audience. He played because he played. Perhaps that's what made it so beautiful.

Some musicians play notes. Other musicians tell stories. He belonged to that second group.

I remember thinking about Martin. About my mother. About home. About things I hadn't thought of in weeks.

That was the strange thing about his music. It brought forth memories without causing pain.

Sometimes he would look up from his guitar and smile briefly at the people listening. Not the smile of someone seeking admiration. More the smile of someone who was happy that music exists.

Those evenings slowly began to take on a rhythm. During the day, I wandered through Rome. In the evenings, I listened to music.

I started to understand that freedom doesn't always have to be grand. Sometimes freedom is simply knowing that you are not expected anywhere. That you get to choose where you go tomorrow.

For someone who had spent her whole life trying to adapt to others, that felt almost unreal.

I no longer recall how many evenings I spent there. Perhaps five. Perhaps ten. Perhaps more.

One evening, someone asked him why he hadn't become famous. I still remember his response almost verbatim. He shrugged and said: "Then I would have less time to play."

I thought that was a beautiful answer.

Maybe because for the first time, I met someone who didn't seem preoccupied with wanting more. More money. More possessions. More success. He seemed content with what there was.

That left an impression on me. More than I realized at the time.

After a while, I began to think about traveling further. Not because I was tired of Rome. Quite the opposite. Maybe precisely because I was afraid of staying too long.

I had learned by then that beautiful things sometimes remain more beautiful when you let them go at the right time.

The thought of Paris slowly began to grow in my mind. Paris. The city of artists. Of writers. Of music. Of bridges over the Seine.

It sounded like a story. And perhaps I wanted to be part of a story at that moment.

On my last evening in Rome, I went to listen one more time. One more time with that guitar. One more time with that warm air. One more time with that feeling of not having to be anywhere.

When he stopped playing, there was a moment of silence. Not an awkward silence.

Good silence. The kind of silence that exists only after beautiful music.

I said goodbye. Not in a grand way. Not dramatically. Just a few words. A smile. And that was enough.

I never saw him again. I don't know where he is now. If he still plays. If he is still alive.

But sometimes I hear a guitar somewhere, and suddenly I am back in Rome. Back in that summer. Back under that warm air. Back with a group of people I hardly knew but who for a moment made me feel like I belonged.

Perhaps that's what traveling does. You don't collect places. You collect pieces of people.

And sometimes you carry those pieces with you for the rest of your life.

A few days later, I departed for Paris.

I thought I might stay a few weeks. Perhaps a month. I had no idea that this city would ultimately become my home for three years. And that Paris might change me more than all the cities before it combined.

Chapter 16 ½ Paris

Chapter 16 ½ Paris

When I arrived in Paris, it felt different from London.
Different from Rome.
London had overwhelmed me.
Rome had embraced me.
Paris did something else.
Paris looked at you first.
As if the city wanted to know who you were before it decided what to think of you.
My first impression was sound.
Trains.
Cars.
Sirens in the distance.
People in a hurry.
People who seemed to have no hurry at all.
Everything at once.
I stepped out of the station with little more than a bag, some clothes, and my own thoughts.
And, to be honest, those thoughts were often heavy enough to carry.
I didn't know where I would sleep in a week.
Not where I would be in a month.
I only knew that I was here.
In Paris.
And that was enough for now.

The first few days, I mostly walked.
Walking was free.
And walking made me feel like I was going somewhere, even when I had no destination.
I walked along the Seine.
Past bridges I knew only from movies.
Past street vendors selling miniature Eiffel Towers to tourists.

Past artists sketching portraits of people in love.
I looked at the city as a child looks at a toy store.
Everything was new.
Everything was interesting.
Sometimes I would sit somewhere just to observe.
Watching people drinking coffee on terraces.
Watching families pass by.
Watching lovers walking hand in hand down the street.
I often wondered where they came from.
Where they were going.
If they were happy.
Maybe because I so often didn't know where I belonged.

Paris has a strange way of life.
People linger longer.
Talk longer.
Eat slower.
As if the city is constantly trying to hold onto time.
I began to develop small rituals.
A certain bench.
A specific route along the river.
A street where music was always playing.
Slowly, the city became less strange.
I began to recognize faces.
A flower seller.
An old man with a dog.
A woman who read the same newspaper every morning at the same cafe.
Those are the moments when a city slowly transforms into a place.
And a place gradually becomes something that resembles home.
Yet there was also another side.
The evenings.
During the day I could lose myself in the hustle and bustle of the city.
But in the evenings, thoughts often returned.
Memories too.
I thought of my mother.
Of Bertus.
Of Martin.
Of the Netherlands.
I thought of the question that had haunted me for years:
Where do I actually belong?

Sometimes I looked at the lights on the Seine and tried to picture what my life might look like in ten years.
I couldn't imagine it.
Maybe because I had never learned to think that far ahead.
When you're primarily focused on getting through today, ten years feels like another planet.
I had little money.
My days were simple.
A sandwich.
A coffee.
Sometimes a cheap meal when I could manage it.
And yet I didn't feel unhappy.
Not at first.
On the contrary.
I felt freedom.
Real freedom.
No one knew where I was.
No one expected anything from me.
No one told me who I should be.
For the first time in my life, I was allowed to figure that out for myself.
But freedom has a shadow side.
And that shadow is called loneliness.
I discovered that slowly.
At first, almost unnoticed.
A quiet evening here.
An empty day there.
People came and went.
Conversations began and ended.
Faces disappeared as quickly as they appeared.
And sometimes it felt like I was the only still person in a city that kept moving.
Yet I stayed.
Day after day.
Week after week.
I told myself that I would soon travel onward.
Just a few more weeks.
Maybe another month.
But Paris had other plans.
Without me realizing it, the city slowly began to crawl under my skin.
The bridges.
The river.
The evenings.

The sounds.

I started to love Paris.

Not because it was easy.

But because it felt honest.

Paris never pretended to be anything other than what it was.

And maybe that's what I needed most.

Honesty.

At that time, I didn't yet know that I would stay here for three years.

That I would experience winters that felt endless.

That I would get sick.

That I would go through moments when I no longer knew how to move forward.

I only knew that I was in Paris.

And that the city and I were not yet done with each other.

Chapter 17 ½ Wandering Without Direction

Chapter 17 ½ Wandering Without Destination

After a few weeks in Paris, I began to see the city differently.
Not as a tourist anymore.
Not as a visitor.
But not yet as a resident either.
I was somewhere in between.
Just like so many times in my life.
My days gradually gained a rhythm.
Not because anyone asked it of me.
But because people need rhythm.
Even when they think they are completely free.
I often woke up early.
Sometimes from the sound of traffic.
Sometimes from voices on the street.
Sometimes just because my mind was awake before my body was.
I walked a lot.
More than I ever had before.
Miles a day.
Maybe dozens of kilometers.
I didn't keep track.
I just walked.
Through narrow streets.
Over bridges.
Along the Seine.
Through parks.
Past old buildings that had seen generations come and go.
Walking brought me peace.
When I walked, I thought less.
Or perhaps I thought better.
I began to have my own places.
A bench I liked to sit on.

A street musician I regularly encountered.
A small bakery that always smelled of fresh bread.
Gradually, Paris began to feel less vast.
Not because the city changed.
But because I did.
I started to recognize the city.
And maybe the city began to recognize me a bit too.
Sometimes I bought a sandwich and sat by the Seine for hours.
Watching boats.
Watching tourists.
Watching couples in love taking pictures as if the world consisted of just that one moment.
I often wondered what their lives looked like.
If they were happy.
If they too carried things within them that no one could see.
Maybe more people do that than we think.
There were days when I felt rich.
Not through money.
Not through possessions.
But through time.
Through freedom.
Through a city that showed something new every day.
But there were also other days.
Quiet days.
Lonely days.
Days when I spoke to no one.
Days when the bustle of millions highlighted just how alone one can feel.
Loneliness in a big city feels different than loneliness in a quiet place.
In a big city, you constantly see lives in which you are not a part.
Families.
Groups of friends.
Couples.
People going somewhere where someone is waiting for them.
Sometimes that hurt.
More than I wanted to admit.
I also started to feel my body more and more.
My feet often ached from walking.
Sometimes it felt like every step burned through my shoes.
Yet I kept walking.
Because standing still was sometimes harder than moving on.
Over time, blisters formed.

At first small.
Later larger.
At one point, some were so thick that every step was painful.
I still remember how happy I could be with a pair of dry socks.
That might sound strange.
But when you have little, small things become significant.
New socks could feel like a gift.
A warm meal like a celebration.
A dry place to sit like a luxury.
Paris gradually began to crawl under my skin.
The smell of rain on warm stones.
The sound of the subway underground.
The street musicians by the bridges.
Sometimes I thought:
Maybe I'll stay here a little longer.
Another month.
A few more months.
I didn't yet know that it would ultimately be three years.
Three years that would shape me.
Change me.
Break me.
And ultimately make me stronger.
For while I slowly began to love Paris, the city also started to reveal its tougher side.

The winters.
The cold.
The fatigue.
The loneliness.
And somewhere in the distance, pneumonia was already waiting, which would temporarily bring my life to a complete standstill.
But I didn't know that then.
Back then, I just walked.
Along the Seine.
Through the city.
Searching for nothing.
And perhaps because of that, sometimes finding exactly what I needed.

Chapter 18 ½ The First Winter

Chapter 18 ½ The First Winter

Summer slowly vanished from Paris.

Not all at once.

Not with a great storm or a sudden chill.

More as if the city was slowly putting on a different coat.

The evenings grew shorter.

The wind became sharper.

The terraces were emptier.

The trees along the Seine changed color.

First a little yellow.

Then orange.

Then brown.

Leaves fluttered over the sidewalks while the city just continued as if nothing had changed.

I noticed it mostly in the people.

In the summer, everyone stayed outside.

People sat on steps.

In parks.

By the water.

The city lived outdoors.

In winter, everyone retreated.

The windows closed.

The doors shut.

People vanished inside faster.

Paris suddenly felt bigger.

And colder.

I still walked a lot.

Perhaps because I didn't know what else to do.

Maybe because walking had by now become a habit.

Perhaps because sitting still meant my thoughts had more room to roam.

I walked along the river.
Through narrow streets.
Past cafés with windows fogged up by the warmth inside.
Sometimes I paused to look inside.
People laughing.
People eating.
People belonging somewhere.
At those moments, I sometimes felt like a spectator instead of a participant.
As if I were watching the lives of other people.
I had known that feeling for a while.
But in winter, it intensified.
The cold slowly crept in everywhere.
Into my hands.
Into my feet.
In my shoulders.
Even the city seemed to grow quieter.
I started to feel tired.
Not just physically.
But inside as well.
The freedom I had so enjoyed in the summer suddenly felt different.
Freedom and loneliness resemble each other more than people think.
Sometimes the difference is hard to see.
I found myself thinking more frequently of the Netherlands.
Of my mother.
Of Bertus.
Of Martin.
Of home.
Or at least what had once been home.
Still, I didn't want to go back yet.
Not because I didn't want to return home.
But because I didn't know exactly where home was.
Paris had changed me.
I felt that.
But I didn't yet know how.
On some evenings, I simply walked through the city without a destination.
Looking at the lights in the water.
At the bridges.
At the people hurrying by with their jackets pulled tight against the wind.
There was something beautiful in those evenings.
But also something sad.
Maybe because big cities constantly remind you of how many lives exist that you are

not part of.
I began to see the same faces more often.
The flower seller.
The man with the dog.
The street musician by the bridge.
They too had become part of my Paris.
And maybe I had become part of their Paris.
Just a woman who often walked by.
Who nodded.
Who sometimes smiled.
The days grew shorter.
The nights longer.
And slowly I began to notice that my body was protesting against the life I led.
I got tired more quickly.
I coughed more often.
I sometimes felt weak.
But I paid little attention to it.
At that age, you think you can handle anything.
That your body will always bounce back.
That tomorrow will simply be better.
I kept walking.
As I always had.
Looking back, I think I was already receiving signals.
That my body was already trying to say that it had had enough.
But listening to myself was something I still had to learn.
That winter taught me a lot.
About loneliness.
About freedom.
About myself.
But the hardest lesson was yet to come.
A lesson that would begin with a cough.
A little fatigue.
And a thought that almost everyone has at some point:
"It will pass on its own."
This time, it did not pass on its own.

Chapter 19 ½ The First Fever

Chapter 19 ½ The First Fever

In the beginning, it was just a little cough. Nothing more than that. A dry cough that occasionally surfaced as I walked through the cold air of Paris. I paid it little mind. Everyone gets a cold once in a while. Everyone coughs sometimes. A few days later, I felt tired. Not ordinary tiredness. More like someone had secretly attached a weight to my shoulders. I still walked through the city. Still by the Seine. Still through the same streets. But it suddenly required more effort. I told myself I just needed to sleep better. Eat more. Take it easy. Tomorrow would surely be better. But tomorrow didn't turn out to be a better day. The cough worsened. It became deeper. Louder.

Sometimes I had to cough for so long that my chest began to hurt. Then the fever arrived. At first, I thought I was imagining it. That I was cold because of the weather. But even under blankets, I continued to shiver. The strange thing about fever is how small your world suddenly becomes. Yesterday, you thought about countries, cities, and plans. Today, everything revolves around a glass of water and whether you can get up. I woke up with wet hair from sweating. My clothes felt damp. My head felt heavy. As if someone had poured sand into it. Still, I tried to push through. That ½s what I always did. Pushing through had become my specialty. I still went outside. Still bought food. Still tried to pretend everything was fine. But my body no longer believed me. Walking became harder. Climbing stairs felt like scaling a mountain.

Even breathing was a struggle. I remember sitting on a bench and wondering: Why am I so tired? I'm nineteen. Nineteen-year-olds shouldn't be this tired. But my body had other plans by now. The nights became the worst. The fever came in waves. Sometimes I was freezing cold. An hour later, it felt like my skin was on fire. I slept poorly. And when I did sleep, I dreamt strangely. Confusing dreams where the Netherlands, Paris, and memories intertwined. I began to lose weight. My appetite slowly vanished. Even a simple sandwich sometimes felt like a monumental task. There were times when I thought maybe I should see a doctor. But I had no insurance. No regular doctor. No safety net. So I did what I had always done.

I tried to solve it myself. Maybe some people learn young that asking for help is complicated. Maybe I had become one of those people. I told myself it would pass on its own. Just a few more days. Just a week. Then I would be better again. But each day I felt worse. Not just a little worse. Really worse. My breathing grew heavier. My chest hurt when I coughed. Sometimes even laughing hurt. I slowly began to feel scared. Not perhaps for the illness itself. But for the idea that I was alone. Being sick is different when there's no one asking how you are. No one making soup. No one saying that everything will be alright. Suddenly, silence becomes very loud.

Sometimes I listened to the sounds of the city outside. Cars. Sirens. Footsteps. Life went on. Just as it always does. And there I lay. Tired. Feverish. Staring at the ceiling. Waiting for my body to decide to cooperate again. But my body had not yet spoken the final word. Not even close. What started as a little cough would ultimately grow into severe pneumonia. A period in which even breathing sometimes felt like work. And during which I first truly feared that I might not make it.

Chapter 20 ½ Two Months Sick

Chapter 20 ½ Two Months Sick

I can't remember exactly what day I realized this was no ordinary flu anymore. Perhaps there wasn't a distinct day. Perhaps it happened gradually. Like most bad things in life.

The cough lingered. The fever persisted. The fatigue remained. And every morning, I woke up with the hope that it would be better. Every morning, it turned out not to be so.

My world became smaller. Much smaller. Where I once walked for hours through Paris, now the distance to the bakery on the corner felt like a challenge. Where I once walked kilometers without a second thought, now I sometimes had to stop to catch my breath.

Breathing. It's something people almost never think about. Until it hurts. With every deep breath, I felt a stabbing pain in my chest. As if my lungs were angry that I continued to use them. Coughing hurt. Laughing hurt. Talking hurt. Even sleeping no longer helped.

I remember nights when I lay awake, listening to my own breathing. In. Out. In. Out. Checking if I could still manage it. Sometimes I woke up because I thought I couldn't get air. I would then sit up straight and wait until my breathing became steadier again.

The fever continued to come and go. Blankets were too warm. Without blankets, I was icy cold. My body seemed to no longer remember what normal was. I sweated a lot. More than I ever had before. Sometimes I woke up with wet clothes and damp hair. As if my body was fighting against something stronger than myself.

I began to lose weight. Not intentionally. My body simply no longer had the energy to feel hunger. Eating a sandwich sometimes felt like a colossal task. On some days, I

lived on water, tea, and the hope that tomorrow would be better. But tomorrow continued to bring the same: fever. Coughing. Fatigue.

I had no insurance. No doctor to call. No parents to pick me up. No safe place to be sick. That last one was perhaps the hardest for me. Not the pain. Not the fever. But the loneliness. Being sick makes people vulnerable. And vulnerability feels very different when you have no one to lean on.

I often looked outside. At Paris, which just kept going. People in a hurry. People laughing. People living as if breathing was a given. I was jealous of them. That may sound strange. But I was envious of people who climbed stairs without a second thought.

One day, I tried to walk a little again. Not even ten minutes later, I had to sit down somewhere because my legs were trembling from exhaustion. That was the moment I truly felt frightened for the first time. I was nineteen. Nineteen-year-olds shouldn't get out of breath from a short walk.

I began to wonder if it would ever get better. It lasted two months in the end. Two months during which my world consisted of fever, coughing, and waiting. And slowly, very slowly, my body began to fight back. The fever came less frequently. The cough became less severe. Breathing hurt a little less. Not much less. But enough to notice the difference.

I still remember the first morning I woke up and felt just a little bit better. Not healthy. Not strong. But better. I got up and walked outside. The air felt cold in my lungs. But this time it hurt a little less. I paused for a moment. Breathed in deeply. And breathed out again. Never before had something so ordinary felt so special.

People often realize how valuable something is when they are about to lose it. For me, that was breathing. Slowly, my strength returned. Very slowly. But something had changed. Not only in my body. Also in my mind. For the first time in my life, I had experienced how vulnerable a person really is. How quickly everything can change. How little health is actually a given.

I eventually walked through Paris again. Along the same streets. Across the same bridges. Along the same river. But I looked at the world differently. Maybe calmer. Also with more gratitude. I thought I had left the hardest part of my time in Paris behind. I was mistaken. Because the loneliness remained. The fatigue lingered. And slowly, something else began to grow. Something darker. Something that wasn't in my lungs but in my head. That would ultimately lead to a metro station. A platform.

And a decision that would change my life forever.

Chapter 21 ½ The Platform

Chapter 21 ½ The Platform

After the pneumonia, I walked through Paris again.
The city had remained the same.
The bridges still stood in the same place.
The Seine still flowed through the middle of the city.
The street musicians continued to play their songs.
Only I had changed.
My body had slowly healed.
My mind, much less so.
I began to grow tired more frequently in a way that was hard to explain.
Not tired from walking.
Not tired from little sleep.
A different kind of tiredness.
A tiredness that sat deeper somewhere.
Sometimes I wandered for hours through the city without really seeing where I was.
My feet moved.
My thoughts drifted.
I looked at people walking by and wondered what their lives looked like.
If they were happy.
If they were scared too.
If they also pretended everything was fine when it wasn't.
Loneliness has a strange way of working.

At first, it feels like silence.
Later, it feels like weight.
And at some point, it feels as if you carry it everywhere with you.
I started to question more frequently where I was actually going.
Not that day.
Not that week.
But in my life.
I was nineteen.

But sometimes I felt much older.
And sometimes much younger.
I thought of home.
Of my mother.
Of Bertus.
Of Martin.
Of everything I had left behind.
And everything I had lost along the way.
Sometimes it felt as if I truly belonged nowhere.
Not in the Netherlands.
Not entirely in France.
Not in the past.
Not in the future.
Just somewhere in between.

As so often.
One day, I found myself at a metro station in Paris.
I remember the sound of the announcements.
The sound of trains slowing down.
People in a hurry.
People walking past each other without looking.
And I especially remember how tired I was.
Not angry.
Not furious.
Just tired.
Tired from fighting.
Tired from carrying.
Tired from always moving forward.
Fortunately, the people around me noticed that I was not well.
Intervention was made.
And in hindsight, I am grateful for that.
Even though it felt very different at the time.
Sometimes, you don't even realize how much help you need.
Until someone else sees it for you.
That day did not end as I had expected.
It ended with helpers.
With conversations.

With questions.
With worried faces.
Not long after, I was admitted to the Saint-Anne hospital in Paris.

A closed ward.
A place I had never thought I would end up.
I remember being afraid.
Afraid of the doors.
Afraid of the rules.
Afraid of myself, perhaps just a little.
But in hindsight, I think what I needed most at that moment was something else.
Calm.
Safety.
People who saw that I could not go on like this.
I don't remember the first few days very well anymore.
Everything felt slow.
As if the world were behind glass.
Slowly, I began to eat again.
To sleep again.
To talk a little bit again.
Not much.
But enough.

Sometimes I looked out the window and thought of the city outside.
Of the Seine.
Of the bridges.
Of the streets where I had walked for so many hours.
Paris suddenly felt very close and very far away at the same time.
And then something happened that I had not expected.
My father came to get me.
Our relationship had not always been easy.
We had had difficult years.
But he came.
That's what I remember.
He came.
Sometimes, love and complexity are not opposites.
Sometimes they exist alongside each other.
I remember seeing him and thinking:
I don't have to do this alone for a while.
Together, we left Paris.
The city where I had lived for three years.
The city where I had found freedom.
Where I had been sick.
Where I had wandered.

Where I had almost vanished.
I looked out one last time during the journey home.
Not to say goodbye.
More to say thank you.
Thank you for the beautiful moments.
For the difficult lessons.
For the bridges.
For the music.
For the summer evenings.
For everything.
I didn't know what would come next.
But for the first time in a long time, I didn't need to know that either.
Sometimes it's enough to only see the next step.
And that next step was home.

Chapter 22 ĩġ ½ Back to the Netherlands

****Chapter 22 ĩġ ½ Back to the Netherlands****

The journey back to the Netherlands felt longer than the trip there years earlier.

Perhaps because I was traveling to somewhere then.

And now I was coming from somewhere.

Those are two different kinds of journeys.

I sat next to my father and gazed out the window.

Landscapes passed by.

Fields.

Cities.

Stations.

Cars on highways.

The lives of other people.

Just like always.

My father and I didn't talk much.

That wasn't necessary.

Some silences are uncomfortable.

Other silences feel safe.

This was one of those safe silences.

Now and then he would say something small.

If I wanted something to drink.

If I was okay.

If I was tired.

Ordinary questions.

But at that moment, ordinary questions felt special.

Sometimes I would look at him without him noticing.

He had grown older.

Suddenly, I noticed that.

Not old.

But older.

As if the years I had been away had also taken their toll on him.

I wondered if he had worried.

If he had been afraid.

If he had felt guilty.
I never asked him.
Perhaps because some questions don't need answers.
When we crossed into the Netherlands, it felt strange.
Familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.
As if I were returning to a house where someone had moved the furniture in the meantime.
The air smelled different.
That may sound strange.
But every country has its own scent.
The Netherlands smelled of rain.
Of grass.
Of home.
And yet home didn't entirely feel like home.
Not anymore.
I was no longer the same girl who had left years ago.
London had changed something.
Rome had changed something.
Paris had changed something.
And perhaps life had mostly done that.
The first weeks back, I felt a bit like a tourist in my own country.
Everything was familiar.
And yet not entirely.
People would sometimes ask how it had been.
How Paris was.
How France was.
And I never quite knew how to respond.
Should I talk about the Seine?
About the street musicians?
About the warm summer evenings?
Or about the loneliness?
The pneumonia?
The hospital?
Sometimes, multiple truths exist at once.
Paris was beautiful.
Paris was heavy.
Both were true.
My father and I slowly found a way to relate to each other again.
Not perfectly.
Not without effort.
But genuinely.

Sometimes we drank coffee.
Sometimes we talked about the past.
Sometimes not at all.
I think we were both trying to get to know each other anew.
Not as father and little girl.
But as two people who had both grown older.
In the meantime, I tried to pick up my own life again.
That proved to be harder than I had thought.
After years of being on the road, sitting still felt strange.
Almost unnatural.
I sometimes missed the bustle of Paris.
The sounds.
The bridges.
The endless walks along the river.
Yet at the same time, I enjoyed small things I hadn't had for years.
A fixed place.
Familiar faces.
A door I could close behind me.
Slowly, I began to make plans again.
Small plans.
No big dreams.
Not yet.
Just getting through the next week.
Then the next month.
And then thinking further.
I thought the hardest part was behind me.
That Paris had been my heaviest chapter.
That I had endured the worst of it.
Life had a different perspective.
For the years that followed would not only bring beautiful memories.
They would also bring farewells.
More farewells than I had ever deemed possible.
First Martin.
Then my mother.
And eventually my father.
At that moment, I didn't know that yet.
Then he was just my father.
Sitting next to me.
On the way home.
And honestly, that was enough at that moment.

Chapter 23 ĩ½ Losing Martin Again

Chapter 23 ĩ½ Losing Martin Again

The strange thing about loss is that it often begins before someone dies. Sometimes it starts with bad news. Sometimes with a phone call. Sometimes with a look from a doctor trying to remain professional while you already see the answer in their eyes. And sometimes it simply begins with fear. The fear that someone who has always existed may not always continue to exist. For me, Martin had never just been my brother. He was my big brother. My childhood hero. The boy who called me ĩ½old bike thief. ĩ½ The boy who would always be older than I. Always bigger. Always stronger. As a child, you think that big brothers don't die. In fact, you think that about everyone you love. Martin was part of the fixed things in my life. Just like my mother. Just like my father. Just like home. And, just like home, that turned out not to be a given. I still remember how strange it felt when I realized he was really sick. Not a flu. Not something temporary. Really sick. The kind of sick that makes people speak more softly. I didn't want to believe it. Maybe I didn't really believe it. Not at first. People often have a kind of silent hope that bad things happen to other people. Not to their own family. Not to their own brother. I think I believed that too. Until I couldn't anymore. The days suddenly split into before the news and after the news. A dividing line that you only see once you've crossed it. I thought a lot about the past. About the jokes. About the teasing. About the times he made me laugh when I really wanted to stay angry. I thought about the little blue bike. About the nickname he had given me. About how naturally he had always been a part of my life. Sometimes people are so naturally present that you never imagine how silence sounds without them. Then came the day when that silence began. Martin died at the age of twenty-two. Twenty-two. Even now that number feels wrong. Incomplete. As if there are missing digits. Twenty-two years is not an age to die. Twenty-two years is an age to make plans. To fall in love. To make mistakes. To live. I still remember thinking: This is not right. There must have been a mistake. But loss does not heed what feels fair. The days following his death have, in part, become blurry. People came by. Coffee was drunk. There was talking. There was crying. And somewhere in between, my mind tried to understand what my heart already knew. He isn't coming back. That might be the heaviest sentence in the Dutch language. He isn't coming

back. I remember the funeral. The flowers. The silence. The people trying to find the right words. But there are no right words for some things. I watched people who knew Martin. Friends. Family. Acquaintances. Everyone had lost their own Martin. I lost my brother. Someone else lost a friend. Another lost a son. Loss has many faces. After the funeral, the silence came. The real silence. Not the silence of a ceremony. But the silence of a phone that no longer rings. A birthday that will never again be celebrated. A chair that remains empty. Those are the moments when loss hits hardest. Not on the big days. But on ordinary Tuesdays. Sometimes I heard a joke and thought: I need to tell Martin about this later. And then it came back. That can't happen anymore. Those kinds of moments never completely disappear. They only become softer. Even now, years later, I sometimes think I see him walking somewhere. In a crowd. On the street. For a second. And then I realize again that it can't be. Maybe that's how love works after someone has died. Your head knows that someone is gone. But your heart sometimes still searches for them for a little longer. I still miss him. Not every minute of every day like before. But at unexpected moments. In a song. In a memory. In a joke he would have liked. And sometimes I still hear his voice in my head. Good going, old bike thief. Then I smile. And for just a moment, it feels as if my big brother is still here. Maybe that is the case. In another way. But still. Because before Martin became a memory, he was my brother. And some things never change.

Chapter 24 ½ My Mother

Chapter 24 ½ My Mother

My mother was not perfect.
No mother is.
But she was my mother.
And sometimes that's all that matters.
When I think of her, I don't first think of illness.
Not of sadness.
I think of little things.
Of her voice.
Of her laughter.
Of the way she pronounced my name.
I think of coffee on the table.
Of ordinary conversations.
Of days that then seemed normal and turned out to be precious later.
Maybe that's the strange thing about memories.
The big events sometimes fade away.
But the little things stay.
My mother had not had an easy life.
She had been through a lot.
More than many people will ever know.
And yet she kept going.

Sometimes I wonder where people draw that strength from.
Perhaps from love.
Perhaps from necessity.
Perhaps from both.
I remember thinking of her as strong when I was a child.
Not strong like in movies.
Not invincible.
But strong in another way.
The kind of strength that gets up again every morning.

That keeps going.
That cares.
Even when it's hard.
The years passed.
We grew older.
And somewhere along the way, the relationship between mother and daughter slowly changed.
I became an adult.
She grew older.
But in my mind, she always remained a little bit just mom.
Then came the illness.
Not suddenly.
Not with one big event.
More like a shadow that slowly drew closer.

Examinations.
Appointments.
Waiting for results.
New tests.
New conversations.
I began to hate those words.
Not because of the words themselves.
But because of what lay behind them.
You try to hold onto hope.
Even when you're scared.
Maybe especially then.
I remember conversations where we pretended everything was normal.
Not because we wanted to fool each other.
But because ordinary conversations can sometimes be a form of resistance against bad news.
You talk about the weather.
About television.
About food.
About little things.
While everyone knows there are bigger things present in the room.
I still remember watching her sometimes when she didn't see.
As if I was trying to remember her.
The way she looked.

The way she laughed.
As if my mind already knew that memories would become important later.

My mother turned fifty years old.
Fifty.
Way too young.
There are ages that feel logical.
And ages that feel wrong.
Fifty felt wrong.
The day she passed away, the world changed again.
Not literally, of course.
The sun still came up.
Cars still drove by.
People still went to work.
But my world certainly changed.
Forever.
I lost not only my mother.
I also lost a part of my past.
A part of my childhood.
A part of my home.
Because no matter how old you get, somewhere you always remain someone's
child.
After her death, I often caught myself having the same thought.
I need to tell mom about this later.
A lovely piece of news.
A funny story.
A difficult day.
And each time, the same answer came back.
That can't happen anymore.
Those might have been the hardest moments.
Not the big moments.
Not the funeral.
Not the flowers.
Not the speeches.
But the ordinary moments.
The Tuesdays.
The Sundays.
The moments when you automatically want to go to someone who is no longer
there.
I still miss her.
Not always in the same way.
Grief changes over the years.
At first, it feels like drowning.
Later, like swimming with heavy clothes on.

Still later, it becomes more like a stone you carry in your jacket pocket.
You don't feel it every minute.
But you know it's there.
Sometimes I hear a song and think of her.
Sometimes I smell something that suddenly takes me back years.
Sometimes it happens out of nowhere.
Without warning.
And very rarely do I smile then.
Because grief and love ultimately lie very close together.
My mother is no longer alive.
But her voice is still somewhere in my memories.
Her laughter too.
And perhaps that is what people leave behind when they depart.
Not just sorrow.
But also a part of themselves.
I have lost much in my life.
But I have never forgotten where I came from.
And a part of that will always belong to her.
Because she was my mother.
And that does not change with farewell.
Not really.

Chapter 25 ½ Valentine's Day 2012

Chapter 25 ½ Valentine's Day 2012

Some dates you never forget.
Not because you want to.
But because your life from that moment on divides into a before and an after.
For me, Valentine's Day 2012 is such a date.
For many, that day stands for flowers.
For cards.
For love.
For us, it became the day we heard my father had cancer.
I still remember how strange that felt.
As if someone had mixed up two completely different stories.
Outside, people were buying gifts for each other.
Inside, our world was changing.
Cancer.
Just the word made the room smaller.
Quieter.
Heavier.
You hear the word.
You understand its meaning.
But deep down, you still hope it's all a mistake.
That someone has confused a file.
A result.
A name.
But this time, there was no mistake.
My father was sick.
Seriously sick.
My father and I didn't have a simple history together.
There were difficult memories.
Difficult years.
Things that had hurt.
Things that might never entirely fade away.

But he was also my father.
And love rarely adheres to simple rules.
The weeks that followed went peculiarly fast and strangely slow at the same time.
Days seemed to last for hours.
Weeks seemed to fly by in just a few minutes.
Hospitals had their own sounds.
Their own smells.
Their own time.
The sound of shoes on hospital floors.
The beeping of machines.
Coffee from vending machines that never really tasted good.
People trying to hold on to hope.

I spent time with him.
Just being there.
Talking whenever he wanted to talk.
Being silent when silence was enough.
Sometimes we talked about the past.
Sometimes about ordinary things.
As if ordinary conversations were a way to keep the illness at bay for a moment.
I often watched him when he didn't notice.
As if I was trying to memorize his face.
The way he looked.
The way he smiled.
The way he could be quiet.
Maybe people do that automatically when they feel time becoming precious.
On February 28, 2012, my father passed away from cancer.
Two weeks after we received the news.
Two weeks.
We got no more time.
I was there.
For that, I am still grateful.
No matter how difficult it was.
At the end, I said to him:
"Dad, I love you."
He replied:
"I know."
Three words.
No more were needed.
Years later, I still carry those words with me.
Not because they solved everything.

Not because they changed the past.
But because they were real.
Sometimes people wonder what a goodbye is supposed to look like.
As if perfect last words exist.
Perfect final conversations.
I don't believe those exist.
There are only real moments.
And this was one of those moments.
After his passing, I felt again that familiar silence.
That silence left behind by loss.
The chair that remains empty.
The phone that no longer rings.
The birthday that will never be celebrated again.
And again, the world went on.

As the world always goes on.
But again, my own world felt different.
Smaller perhaps.
Quieter too.
My father had been complicated.
Our relationship had been too.
But he was my father.
That remained true until his last breath.
And it remained true afterward.
Sometimes I still think of those last words.
"I know."
There is something comforting in those words.
As if there are ultimately things that can be said without explanation.
Without conditions.
Simply because they are true.
I loved him.
Clumsily sometimes.
Complicatedly sometimes.
But truly.
And I think he knew that.
Perhaps that is ultimately enough.

Chapter 26 ½ The House Without Parents

****Chapter 26 ½ The House Without Parents****

There exists a moment in the lives of some people when they realize that no one is there above them anymore.

No mother to call.

No father to ask a question.

No family home waiting for you somewhere.

That moment came for me much earlier than I ever thought it would.

After my father's passing, it gradually dawned on me.

My mother was gone.

My father was gone.

Martin was gone.

The people who had been part of my beginning had vanished from my daily life.

That realization did not come all at once.

Grief rarely works that neatly.

It comes in waves.

Sometimes hard.

Sometimes soft.

Sometimes at moments when you least expect it.

I remember one day hearing something funny and automatically thinking:

I need to tell that later.

And right after, I realized again that I could no longer do that.

Those are the moments when loss reveals itself.

Not during funerals.

Not during memorials.

But on Tuesdays.

In supermarkets.

During meals.

In the car.

Ordinary moments.

Sometimes I looked at other people and felt jealous of something very simple.

That they still had parents.

That they could still go visit someone.
That there was still someone asking if they were eating enough.
That may sound childish for an adult.
But loss makes some feelings very young again.
Sometimes I felt older than my age.
And at the same time, sometimes I felt like a little girl who had lost her mother.
The idea of home changed once more.
A house is made of bricks.
A home consists of people.
And many of my people had disappeared.
I began to understand better why people say that grief is not a straight line.
You don't get a little better every day.
That's not how it works.
Some days go well.
And then suddenly you catch a whiff of a perfume that reminds you of your mother.
Or you hear a song your father used to listen to.
And suddenly you're back years ago.
Grief has no schedule.
It comes when it wants to.
I started to withdraw more and more.
Not consciously.
Not as a choice.
It just happened.
I spoke to fewer people.
I shared fewer feelings.
I kept more to myself.
Maybe I thought I had to be strong.
Maybe I simply didn't know how to ask for help anymore.
In the years that followed, I slowly began to lose myself.
Not in one big event.
But in hundreds of small moments.
A drink to stop thinking for a moment.
A second drink to avoid thinking a little longer.
And ultimately moments when numbing seemed easier than feeling.
Alcohol first became an aid.
Later a habit.
And even later something I began to lean on.
Drugs also entered my life.
Not because I was adventurous.
Not because I wanted to be cool.
But because pain sometimes seeks silence.

And substances promise that silence temporarily.
The problem is that grief is patient.
It simply waits until the numbness has worn off.
And every time it came back.
The emptiness.
The longing.
The questions.
I began to neglect myself.
Eating became less important.
Sleeping too.
Taking care of myself sometimes felt like I was meant to care for someone else.
The person in the mirror started to look less and less like me.
Or maybe I was just looking less carefully.
People around me probably noticed it sooner than I did.
That happens often.
From the inside, change feels slow.
From the outside, sometimes very fast.
Yet I kept going.
As I always had.
Pressing on had almost become a reflex.
But somewhere deep inside, I knew I was starting to get tired.
Not physically.
Not just mentally.
A deeper kind of tiredness.
The weariness of carrying for years.
At that time, I didn't yet know how dark it would get.
Not that November 2023 would ever come.
Not that a fire would change my life again.
Not that I would eventually write my story from a forensic clinic.
I only knew that I was tired.
And that I felt like I was drifting further away from myself.
Maybe that was the beginning of getting lost.
Or perhaps I had started losing my way much earlier without noticing it.
What I do know is that even those who are lost sometimes keep searching for the way back.
Even when they themselves don't know they are searching.
Maybe I was doing that then too.
Without realizing it.

Chapter 27 ĩ½ Numbness

Chapter 27 ĩ½ Numbing

I canĳt remember exactly when it all began.
Perhaps hardly anyone knows that.
Thereĳs rarely a day when someone wakes up and decides:
from today on, I'm going to lose myself.
Thatĳs not usually how it works.
It happens slowly.
Almost imperceptibly.
At first, it was simple.
A drink to relax.
An evening when I didnĳt have to think about anything.
A few hours without memories pressing in.
A few hours without sadness lurking in the background.
And to be fair,
it worked at first.
Or at least, thatĳs how it felt.
The sharp edges softened.
My mind grew quieter.
The voices of memories grew gentler.
The emptiness felt less vast.
Perhaps that's exactly why so many people get stuck in it.
Not because they are weak.
But because pain can sometimes be very convincing when it promises an escape.

Slowly, something changed.
Not overnight.
More like someone was gradually turning up the volume without me noticing.
What was once occasional became more frequent.
What was once a choice became a habit.
I began to take less care of myself.
Meals were skipped.

Days began and ended without any real structure.
The line between morning and evening sometimes became narrower than I wanted to admit.
Friends slowly faded from the picture.
Not always due to arguments.
Sometimes simply because I stopped answering calls.
Stopped reading messages.
Postponed plans until there were ultimately no plans left.
It's strange how a person can withdraw without really noticing.
You think you need a little rest.
Some time for yourself.
And suddenly you look back, and months have passed.

I began to recognize myself less.
Not only in the mirror.
Also in my behavior.
In my choices.
In the things I found important.
There were days when I promised myself things would change.
That tomorrow would mark the beginning of something new.
That I would get it under control again.
And sometimes I truly believed it.
Until evening fell once more.
Until memories returned.
Until sadness knocked on the door again.
Sadness is patient.
It waits calmly.
And when the numbness fades, it often remains right where it was.
I often thought of my mother.
Of Martin.
Of my father.
Of Paris.
Of everything I had lost.
Of everything I wished had been different.
Grief has no expiration date.
By now, I had learned that.
But I still didn't know how to live with it without running away.

There were days I was tired of fighting.
Tired of being strong.
Tired of going on.

Because going on was what I had always done.
Ever since childhood, really.
Just keep going.
Don't stand still.
Don't feel.
Above all, keep walking.
But you can't run your whole life without eventually gasping for breath.
Sometimes I looked at old photos.
At the girl with the blue bicycle.
At the young woman in Hyde Park.
At the traveler in Rome.
At the walker in Paris.
And I wondered where those versions of me had gone.
I didn't know then that a much darker period would follow.
That November 2023 would change my life again.
That I would eventually end up in a clinic where I would slowly learn to look at myself again.
But deep down, beneath everything I had lost,
the same little girl from before still remained.
The girl who kept hoping.
Even when hope had become very small.

Perhaps that was ultimately the most important thing.
Not that I never got lost.
But that somewhere, there was always a small part of me still searching for the way back.
Even when I didn't yet know I had lost it.

Chapter 28 ĩ½ November 2023

Chapter 28 ĩ½ November 2023

November 2023 began as an ordinary month. At least, that ĩ½s how it seemed. In hindsight, there are often signs that you only recognize later. More tension. Less sleep. More unrest in my mind. The feeling that I was constantly on edge. I felt worse and worse. Not physically. From within. As if I had been fighting for months without knowing exactly what against. I slept poorly. Thought a lot. Perhaps too much. My mind was working overtime. Thoughts tangled together. Fear and reality sometimes became difficult to distinguish. I felt like I wasn ĩ½t alone. That someone was watching me. That someone had been in my home or was hiding. At that moment, it felt very real.

Later, many questions would remain about what exactly had happened and what hadn ĩ½t. But the feeling of fear was real. I still know that. At a certain point, despair took over from thinking. I set a blanket on fire. I had also turned on the gas. Then I lay down on the bed. Sometimes people ask afterward why someone does such things. But despair doesn ĩ½t think logically. Despair doesn ĩ½t calculate. Despair doesn ĩ½t plan. Despair just wants the pain to stop. After about ten minutes, the smoke was already thick in the room. Much faster than I had expected. Much faster than I had realized. At that moment, I jolted awake from my thoughts and confusion. I wanted to live. I wanted out. And above all: I wanted to save my cats. I went to my knees toward the window. The smoke hung low and thick in the room.

Breathing became difficult. Seeing too. I tried to reach the windowsill. I tried to find my cats. But the smoke made everything hard. One of the cats had hidden under the bed. She would survive in the end. Moppie. Two other cats didn ĩ½t make it. That sorrow is something I still carry with me. I ultimately ran outside. In a panic. In shock. No longer thinking. Only reacting. Outside sat a neighbor boy who immediately called for help. Luckily, the fire department was nearby. In the same street, even. I still remember that I had hope. That maybe everything would turn out okay after all. I sat on the ground right by the window.

Watching the smoke. Watching people run back and forth. Watching a world that suddenly felt unreal. Later, I heard from the police that a wounded man had also been found during the fire. That raised many questions and confusion for me. I didn't know him and didn't understand why he was there or what had exactly happened. Many of those questions I could never fully answer. After the fire came a period of hospitalization. I spent about three months in a High Care unit. My mind needed rest. My body too. After that came a period in detention. For about a year and a half, I waited for a spot within the TBS system. Those were long months. Months in which I thought a lot about my life. About choices. About loss. About grief. Eventually, a spot became available. The clinic where I am now writing this story.

When people hear the term TBS, they often immediately have a preconceived notion. But for me, it initially meant something different. Peace. Structure. Help. Treatment. For the first time in a long time, I didn't have to carry everything alone anymore. For the first time in a long time, there were people who asked how I was really doing. And who also waited for the answer. That didn't mean that everything was suddenly okay. Far from it. But it did mean that I was no longer alone. I am now forty-three years old. And as I write this, I am still in that clinic. For already a year. I am doing better. Not every day. Not without difficult moments. But better. Maybe recovery isn't the disappearance of pain. Maybe recovery is learning to live alongside that pain without being overwhelmed by it. What happened in November 2023 will always be part of my story. But it is no longer my whole story.

No longer just that. Because even after fire. Even after loss. Even after despair. Something can still remain. Hope. Sometimes very small. But strong enough to start anew.

Chapter 29 ½ High Care

Chapter 29 ½ High Care

The first days at High Care still feel like I'm watching someone else.

As if I'm watching a film in which I play a part.

Images.

Sounds.

Fragments of conversations.

The rest is a fog.

I remember doors.

Many doors.

Doors that locked.

Doors that opened at set times.

Doors that reminded me that I wouldn't be going outside for a while.

I remember the silence.

Not the quiet silence of a forest or an empty room.

A different silence.

The silence that comes after everything in your life suddenly comes to a standstill.

There were nurses.

Doctors.

Conversations.

Questions.

Many questions.

How are you?

1

What do you remember?

Do you feel safe?

Some questions I could answer.

Others I could not.

Some answers I didn't even know yet.

I was tired.
Deeply tired.
Not just from the events.
Not just from the months before.
Tired from years.
From loss.
From keeping going.
From trying to be strong.

For the first time in a long time, I didn't have to solve anything for a while.
That felt strange.
Almost uncomfortable.

My days gained structure.
Breakfast.
Medication.
Conversations.
Moments of rest.
Dinner.
Weeeeeeee
2
Sleep.
And the next day began anew.

Structure sounds small.
But when your life has been chaos for a long time, structure can feel like a lifeline.

Sometimes I sat by the window.
Looking outside.
At trees.
At rain.
At people going somewhere.

I wondered how my life had ended up here.
Which turns I had taken.
Which ones I had missed.

A lot of guilt passed by.
About things that had happened.

About people I had lost.
About choices I had made.

Guilt is heavy.
Sometimes heavier than sorrow.
Because sorrow is about what you have lost.
Guilt is about what you blame yourself for.

Slowly, I began to talk.

3

At first cautiously.
Then a bit more.
About my childhood.
About Martin.
About my mother.
About my father.
About Paris.
About everything I had carried for years.

Some stories I had never told out loud.
Not entirely.
Not honestly.

The strange thing was that nothing changed when I told them.
The world didn't collapse.
The people in front of me didn't walk away.

They listened.
Just listening.
I had underestimated how important that can be.

The nights were difficult.
Dreams returned.
Memories too.
Sometimes I would wake up and not know for a moment where I was.

But slowly, something else also returned.

4

Calm.
Not much.
Not always.

But occasionally.

A quiet morning.

A good conversation.

A cup of coffee that just tasted like coffee.

Little things.

Recovery often consists of little things.

Not grand victories.

Not one special moment.

But dozens of small steps that you only notice in hindsight.

After about three months, I left High Care.

Not because everything was resolved.

Not because I was better.

But because the next step was ready for me.

Then came detention.

Waiting.

Months that passed slowly.

And finally, the place where I am now.

The clinic.

When I look back on that period, I see not just the darkest weeks of my life.

5

I also see the beginning of something else.

The beginning of allowing help.

The beginning of looking honestly at myself.

The beginning of recovery.

Not the end of my story.

Perhaps precisely the beginning of a new chapter.

6

Chapter 30 ½ Waiting

****Chapter 30 ½ Waiting****

After High Care came detention.

That sounds harsh.

And to be honest, it felt harsh too.

Not just the doors.

Not just the walls.

Mostly the idea that my life had suddenly come to a complete standstill.

I had to wait about a year and a half for a place in a secure psychiatric facility.

A year and a half.

That sounds short when you say it out loud.

But when you're waiting, a week can sometimes feel like a month.

And a month like a year.

In the first days, I still counted.

Days.

Weeks.

Maybe even hours.

Later, I stopped.

Because counting doesn't make time go by faster.

My life became small.

Very small.

Get up.

Breakfast.

Breaks.

Meals.

Sleep.

And then again.

Structure can help.

But structure without perspective sometimes feels like stagnation.

I thought a lot.

Perhaps more than was good for me.

About my childhood.

About Martin.

About my mother.
About my father.
About Paris.
About November 2023.
Sometimes it felt as if I was reviewing my entire life again.
As if I was flipping back through the chapters.
Looking for the moment when I lost myself.
Maybe such a moment doesn't exist.
Maybe people don't get lost in a single day.
Maybe it happens slowly.
Almost unnoticed.
I also began to write more and more.
Not because anyone asked me to.
But because words sometimes feel lighter on paper than in your head.
I wrote down memories.
Names.
Dates.
Moments I didn't want to lose.
Sometimes I wrote about my mother.
Sometimes about Martin.
Sometimes about Hyde Park.
About Rome.
About Paris.
And sometimes I wrote nothing at all.
Then I would just look at a blank sheet of paper.
That happened too.
There were days when I was angry.
Angry at myself.
Angry at life.
Angry at everything I had lost.
And there were days when I was simply tired.
Not sad.
Not angry.
Just tired.
I slowly learned that feelings don't come in an orderly fashion.
They intertwine.
Sadness can coexist with relief.
Guilt alongside love.
Anger next to hope.
One day, the news I had been waiting for arrived.
A place was available.

A secure psychiatric facility.

I remember not knowing what I should feel.

Relief perhaps.

Fear too.

Because a new place also means new conversations.

New people.

New confrontations.

But it also meant something else.

Help.

Treatment.

A chance to not just look back at what had happened, but also to look forward.

Looking forward was perhaps the hardest part for me.

I had become so accustomed to surviving that I had almost forgotten what it felt like to hope.

On the day I left, I looked back one last time.

Not out of nostalgia.

Not out of regret.

More to tell myself:

up to here.

This chapter is over.

For me, something new was beginning.

Not easy.

Not quick.

But new.

I did not yet know how many conversations would follow.

How many memories would resurface.

How difficult EMDR could sometimes be.

But I did know one thing.

I was still here.

After everything that had happened.

After everything I had lost.

I was still here.

And sometimes that is the first step toward recovery.

Not that everything is well.

But simply that you are still here to start anew.

Chapter 31 ½ The First Day in the Clinic

Chapter 31 ½ The First Day in the Clinic

The day I arrived at the clinic, it rained. At least, that's how I remember it. Perhaps it really did rain. Maybe my mind conjured up the rain afterward because it fit better with how I felt. That tends to happen with memories. I looked out the window during the ride. Trees. Roads. Buildings slipping by. No one spoke much. Neither did I. I didn't quite know what to expect. The term TBS conjured an image for me, just as it did for many others. High fences. Locked doors. Control. Part of that turned out to be true. But not everything.

When I arrived, I indeed saw fences. Secured doors. Cameras.

But I also saw something different. People who greeted me warmly. Nurses introducing themselves. Individuals who seemed to look not only at my file but also at me. That felt strange. I had become accustomed to forms. Reports. Diagnoses. Incidents. But somewhere behind all that paperwork, Angela was still just Angela. And for the first time in a long time, someone seemed to find that important.

My room was simple. A bed. A wardrobe. A desk. A window. I remember sitting on the bed and thinking: So this is it. This is where I'll be living for now. That feeling was hard to explain. Not just sadness. Not just relief. More of a sort of in-between space. As if my old life had passed, and my new life had not yet fully begun.

The first days were strange. New rules. New faces. New routines. Breakfast at set times. Conversations at set times. Walking moments. Therapy. Structure. I realized how tired I actually was. Not from that week. Not from that month. But from years. Years of loss. Years of pushing through. Years of not feeling what I actually felt. Sometimes I would sit in my room, thinking about my life as if it belonged to someone else. The girl with the blue bicycle. The young woman in Hyde Park. The traveler in Rome. The walker in Paris. The woman in the ambulance.

They sometimes seemed like different people. But they were all me. Perhaps that

was the hardest part of recovery for me. Not understanding what had happened. But accepting that it all belonged to my story. In the first weeks, I spoke little. I mostly listened. I mostly watched. I had done that before. First observe. First understand where I had ended up. Slowly, I got to know people. Other patients. Caregivers. People with their own stories. Their own losses. Their own struggles.

That changed something in me. Not because my own story became smaller. But because I realized that pain has many faces. I slowly began to find a rhythm again. Getting up. Having breakfast. Walking. Talking. Sleeping. For many people, that sounds normal. For me, it felt almost new. There were difficult days. Of course, there were. Days when memories felt too heavy. Days when guilt returned. Days when I wondered if I would ever have a normal life again. But there were also small victories. A good conversation. A walk. A good night's sleep. A moment when I laughed without guilt.

Recovery rarely looks impressive. Often, it resembles small things that slowly grow larger. And somewhere between those small things, something began to return that I had been missing for years. Not happiness. Not yet. But something that comes before it. Safety, perhaps. Calm. Trust. For the first time in a long time, I didn't just have to survive. For the first time in a long time, I could cautiously begin to live.

At that point, I didn't know that EMDR would awaken memories I thought I had lost. I didn't know how heavy some conversations would become. I didn't know how much work recovery actually is. But I did know one thing. I was no longer alone. And sometimes, that is the beginning of everything.

Chapter 32 ½ The First EMDR Session

Chapter 32 ½ The First EMDR Session

-

I had heard about EMDR before I started with it.

People said things like:

"It helps."

"It's tough, but it works."

"You have to go through it to get out."

That all sounded nice.

But to be honest, I primarily knew that I was afraid.

Afraid of memories.

Afraid of feelings.

Afraid of things I had tried not to feel for years.

Because that was ultimately what I had done for most of my life.

Keep going.

Survive.

Not dwell too long.

Not look too deep.

Not feel too much.

The therapist calmly explained how it works.

That memories can sometimes get stuck.

That your brain can't always process difficult events well when there's too much fear, stress, or sadness at that moment.

That EMDR can help make those memories less sharp and overwhelming.

1

It sounded logical.

But logical and easy are two different things.

I sat in the chair and felt my hands sweating.

Part of me wanted to get up and leave.

Another part knew I had to stay right there.

The therapist asked me to think of a memory that invoked a lot of tension.

Not the worst one immediately.

Just a memory that felt heavy.

And suddenly I was no longer forty-three.
I was small again.
Much smaller.
That was perhaps the strangest thing about trauma.
You know you're safe.
You know you're sitting in a room with a therapist.
You know it happened years ago.
And yet sometimes your body feels as if it happened yesterday.
My heart started to race.
My shoulders tensed.
My hands trembled a little.
The therapist kept talking calmly.
Breathe.

2

Keep looking.
Keep feeling.
For the first time in a long time, I tried not to run away from a memory.
Not literally.
But also not in my head.
That turned out to be harder than I had expected.
Some images came back.
Fragments.
Sounds.
Feelings.
Not always complete memories.
More loose pieces from the past.
I thought of my mother.
Of Martin.
Of my father.
Of the little girl who always tried to understand why grown-ups did what they did.
Sometimes tears came.
Sometimes they didn't at all.
I learned that too.
There's no right way to feel sadness.
Afterwards, I was exhausted.

3

Really exhausted.
As if I had been walking for hours while I had only been sitting in a chair.
The therapist said that was normal.
My mind had been working.
So had my body.

That evening, I slept poorly.
Memories kept coming.
Dreams too.
Not all pleasant.
Not all clear.
Yet something had changed.
Very small.
Almost invisible.
For the first time, I hadn't just tried to survive what had happened.
I had looked at it.
Really looked.
That felt scary.
But also important.
The sessions that followed weren't easy.
Some days it felt like I took two steps forward and three steps back.
Other days I suddenly noticed that a memory came back less harshly than before.

4

Slowly, I began to understand something.
Recovery doesn't mean forgetting.
It doesn't mean sadness disappears either.
My mother remained deceased.
Martin remained deceased.
My father remained deceased.
My past didn't change.
But perhaps my past didn't need to change.
Maybe only my relationship with it needed to change.
That was a new thought for me.
And to be honest, also a difficult one.
I had tried for years to push memories away.
Now I was learning something different.
That sometimes you have to look softer at what hurts.
Not because it becomes less painful.
But because otherwise, you keep running away from it your whole life.
After that first session, I walked back to my room in the clinic.
I was tired.
Emotional.
Maybe a little empty too.
But deep down, I felt something else.

5

Something I hadn't felt in a long time.
Cautious trust.

Not in the world.

Not in the future.

Not yet.

But maybe a little bit in myself.

And that was more than I had had in a long time.

6

Chapter 33 ½ The Five-Year-Old Girl

Chapter 33 ½ The Girl of Five

During EMDR, something happened that no one could have truly prepared me for.

Not the memories themselves.

But the way they returned.

I had always thought that memories worked like photographs.

A clear image.

A beginning.

A middle.

An end.

But it didn't work that way.

Sometimes only a scent returned.

The smell of coffee.

Of rain.

Of a house that no longer exists.

Sometimes it was a sound.

Footsteps on a staircase.

A door slamming shut.

A voice from another room.

And sometimes it was just a feeling.

Fear.

Sadness.

Loneliness.

Without knowing exactly where it came from.

During one of the sessions, the therapist asked me not only to look at what had happened.

But also at who I was back then.

Not Angela at forty-three.

Not Angela in the clinic.

But the Angela of the past.

The girl who experienced everything.

The girl who felt everything.

And suddenly I saw her.
Not literally, of course.
But in my mind.
A little girl.
Cautious.
Curious.
Always looking at the people around her.
Always trying to understand how the world worked.
A girl who often thought that difficult things were her own fault.
Just like children sometimes do.
Children have the peculiar ability to take responsibility for things they have no responsibility for at all.
When parents argue, a child sometimes thinks:
maybe it's my fault.

When adults are sad, a child sometimes thinks:
maybe I did something wrong.
I think I often did that, too.
During that session, something strange happened.
For the first time, I felt no anger toward that little girl.
No disappointment.
No judgment.
Only compassion.
And perhaps also pride.
Because despite everything, she kept going.
She kept hoping.
Kept dreaming.
Kept searching for bright spots.
She found a little blue bike to be the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.
She could be happy with music in Hyde Park.
With a guitar in Rome.
With the lights on the Seine.
Somewhere along the way, I had forgotten how strong that actually was.
The therapist asked me what I would want to say to her if she were sitting in front of me now.
I thought for a long time.

And finally, I said:
"You don't have to bear everything alone."
That made me cry.
More than I had expected.

Because perhaps I was saying those words not just to the girl of five.
Perhaps I was saying them to myself as well.
After the session, I walked outside.
It was cold.
The air smelled of rain.
I took a deep breath.
For the first time in a long time, it felt like my past didn't consist only of pain.
There had been other things too.
Love.
Humor.
Curiosity.
Music.
Traveling.
People who had mattered.
Trauma sometimes tends to take up all the space.
As if it were the only story that counts.
But my life was bigger than my trauma.

Bigger than loss.
Bigger than sadness.
I was not only the girl who had been afraid.
I was also the girl with the blue bike.
The woman in Hyde Park.
The traveler in Rome.
The walker in Paris.
The survivor of November 2023.
And maybe, just maybe, I was slowly beginning to understand that all those versions
of me could coexist.
Not as enemies.
But as chapters.
Because a book does not consist of a single page.
And neither does a person.

Chapter 34 ĩġ½ My Mother Appears Again

Chapter 34 ĩġ½ My Mother Reappears

Some people never completely disappear.
They vanish from rooms.
From photographs that are no longer taken.
From phone calls.
From birthdays.
But not from your mind.
And certainly not from your heart.
During one of the EMDR sessions, my mother suddenly came back.
Not literally, of course.
But in memories.
In images.
In fleeting moments of which I hadn't even realized I still carried with me.
I saw her hands.
That was the first thing that returned.
Strangely enough, not her face.
Not her voice.
Her hands.
Hands pouring coffee.
Hands unpacking groceries.
Hands that held me as a child when I was sad.
Memories sometimes choose for themselves what is important.

Then her voice returned.
Not the words.
Only the sound.
That familiar sound that you think youĳġ½ve forgotten until it suddenly exists
somewhere in your head again.
I had to cry.
Not because I discovered something new.
But because I realized how much I had lost.

Loss doesn't happen just once.
I had learned that by now.
You lose someone again on birthdays.
On holidays.
With good news.
With bad news.
With every event that makes you automatically think:
I have to tell Mom about this later.
And then you remember again that you can't.

The therapist asked me what I missed the most.
I thought for a long time.
And eventually, I said:
"The ordinary things."
Not the big conversations.
Not the special moments.
The ordinary things.
Drinking coffee together.
Watching television together.
Talking about absolutely nothing important.
Because ultimately, life mostly consists of ordinary days.
And it is precisely those ordinary days that often vanish the hardest when someone
is no longer there.

I thought back to Bertus.
To the calm he brought.
To my mother, who seemed to laugh more during those years.
I thought of the difficult times.
Of her illness.
Of the fear that came with it.
Of the little girl who was afraid of losing her mother.
Maybe that's where my fear of loss began.
Maybe I learned then that people can disappear.
That safety can be temporary.
That happiness sometimes has to be treated carefully because you're afraid of
losing it.

I didn't always understand my mother.
Just as she probably didn't always understand me.
That may be part of mothers and daughters.
But love doesn't have to be perfect to be real.

During the session, the therapist asked a difficult question.

"What would your mother say to you now?"

I didn't know.

Not immediately.

But slowly, an answer began to emerge.

Not because I truly heard her words.

But because I knew her.

I think she would say:

"You're still here."

"Keep going."

"Don't give up on yourself."

Maybe she would tell me to be gentler with myself.

That I don't have to carry everything alone.

That guilt isn't the same as responsibility.

And maybe she would just give me a hug and say nothing more.

Sometimes words aren't necessary.

After the session, I kept thinking about her for a long time.

About her laugh.

About her voice.

About her presence in my life.

People sometimes ask when sadness goes away.

I don't think it goes away.

I think it changes.

At first, sadness is a storm.

Then it becomes rain.

Later, it turns into something that remains present somewhere in the background.

Not visible every day.

But always part of the landscape.

My mother lived to be fifty.

That still feels too young.

That will probably always feel that way.

But when I think of her, I don't want to think only of illness.

Not just of farewell.

I want to think of laughter.

Of ordinary days.

Of coffee on the table.

Of a mother who did her best in a life that wasn't always easy.

Because ultimately, people are more than their last chapter.
And so was my mother.
She was here.
She was important.
She was loved.
And a part of her still walks with me.
In memories.
In habits.
In things I do without realizing that I learned them from her.
Maybe that's what love ultimately does.
It remains.
Even when people have to go.

Chapter 35 ½ My Father Appears Again

Chapter 35 ½ My Father Appears Again

My father was perhaps the hardest memory to face.
Not because I had forgotten him.
On the contrary.
Perhaps precisely because he had never truly vanished.
Some relationships are simple.
You love someone.
Or you do not love someone.
But family often works differently.
Family can hold both love and pain at the same time.
And sometimes those two things exist side by side for years.
When my father returned during an EMDR session, it wasn't the difficult memories
that surfaced first.
That surprised me.
I had expected my mind to immediately dive into arguments.
Into tension.
Into sorrow.
But the first thing that came back was his voice.
Just his voice.
An ordinary memory.
An ordinary day.
Then other images followed.
Moments when he joked.
Moments when he laughed.
Moments when he was just my father.
That perhaps made it all the more complicated.
People are rarely only good or only bad.
Most people are both.
And perhaps that is even more true for parents than for anyone else.
I thought back to my childhood.
To the difficult moments.

To the things that had caused pain.
To moments I didn't understand as a child.
The therapist asked me something I found difficult.
"Can two things be true at the same time?"
I looked at her.
I didn't know what she meant.
Then she said:
"Can you love someone and at the same time be hurt by what that person has done?"
That was a hard question.
But also an important one.
Because for years I had thought that I had to choose.
To be angry or to love.
To forgive or to remember.
Perhaps it didn't have to be that way at all.
Maybe those feelings could just exist alongside each other.
I loved my father.
That is true.
Some things that happened were painful.
That is also true.
Those two truths do not fight with each other.
They simply exist side by side.
I thought back to Valentine's Day 2012.
To the news.
To the hospital rooms.
To the smell of coffee from vending machines.
To conversations that went nowhere because the real conversations had become too large.
And of course, I recalled his last words.
"Dad, I love you."
"I know."
Three words.
Nothing more.
But sometimes three words are enough to carry with you for years.
I told the therapist that I still hear those words.
Not every day.
But often enough.
Sometimes when I think of him.
Sometimes when I doubt myself.
Sometimes just because.
"I know."

There's something soothing in those words.
As if, in the end, there are things that do not need to be explained.
I don't think my father had an easy life.
I also don't think he always knew how to be a father.
Maybe most parents don't know that.
Perhaps people mostly do their best with what they have received themselves.
That doesn't erase the pain.
But sometimes understanding makes something larger.
Forgiveness is a difficult word.
People often use it as if it's an endpoint.
As if one day you wake up and think:
now everything is resolved.
That's not how it works for me.
For me, it seems more about accepting that the past cannot change.
That you can change how you look at it.
When the session ended, I felt tired.
But different tired than before.
Not empty.
More as if I had set down a heavy bag that I had been carrying for years without
noticing how heavy it had become.
I walked back to my room and thought of my father.
Not only about the difficult things.
Not only about the last weeks.
But about the whole.
About the man my father had been.
With all his good sides.
With all his difficult sides.
With everything in between.
And perhaps for the first time.
That I wasn't trying to see him solely as a hero or just as a failure.
But simply as a human.
My father passed away at sixty-two.
Much too soon.
Just like so many people I have lost.
But loss has one strange characteristic.
It takes someone out of the world.
But not out of your story.
My father is still in my story.
In memories.
In words.
In silence.

And sometimes in three simple words I will never forget.

"I know."

And perhaps in the end, that was exactly what I needed to hear.

Chapter 36 ½ The Fire Returns

Chapter 36 ½ The Fire Returns

Some memories aren't captured in words.
They reside in sounds.
In scents.
In images that suddenly appear without warning.
The fire of November 2023 was such a memory.
During EMDR, I thought I was prepared.
After all, I had already faced difficult memories.
My childhood.
My parents.
Martin.
Paris.
But the fire felt different.
The fire was still too close.
Too fresh.
The therapist gently asked me to think back to that day.
Not to everything at once.
Just to the beginning.
I mainly remember unrest.
Not one clear thought.
More like a feeling that everything had become too much.
As if my head was a room where all the radios were playing at once.

I slept poorly.
Thought a lot.
Felt hunted.
As if my body was always ready to run away from something without knowing what.

Then the images returned.
The room.
The smoke.

The smell.
Smell is strange.
You can go years without smelling anything.
And then suddenly one smell brings you back to a moment you thought you had left behind.
I remember the smoke.
The speed with which it spread.
How quickly air suddenly became something precious.
I remember wanting to find my cats.
That moment is clearer in my memory than almost anything before it.
On my knees in the smoke.
Searching.
Calling.
Trying.

People sometimes think you panic in danger.
But many become very calm.
Very practical.
You just do what you have to do.
Only later does everything else come.
I remember the window.
The floor.
The smoke that grew thicker.
And then I mainly remember outside.
Cold air.
People.
Voices.
Sirens.
ĩ¿½Viraaaaaĩ¿½
During the session, I started to cry when I talked about my cats.
Not about myself.
Not about the fire.
About them.
Two of them didn't survive.
That sorrow runs deep.
Deeper than I sometimes understand myself.
Moppie was still alive.
Under the bed.

Afraid.
But alive.

It helped me to know that she eventually found a safe home with a family.
That doesn't change the loss.
But it makes it a bit more bearable.
Guilt often resurfaced during therapy.
Much more often than anger.
Much more often than fear.
Could I have done something different?
Should I have sought help sooner?
Should I have made different choices?
These are questions without answers.
And perhaps that's precisely why they linger for so long.
The therapist said something that stuck with me.
Guilt often tries to create order in chaos.
I had to think about that for a long time.
Because perhaps guilt sometimes felt safer than helplessness.
If something was my fault, it meant at least that there was an explanation.
But not everything has a clear explanation.
Not everything is controllable.

Not everything has a logical story.
Accepting that I found difficult.
Maybe I still find that difficult.
During one of the sessions, the therapist asked:
What would you say to someone else who had experienced exactly the same?
That turned out to be easier than talking to myself.
I would say:
You were in distress.
You were scared.
You were trying to survive.
You deserve help.
Then came the difficult question.
Why don't those words apply to you?
I had no answer for that.
Not then.
Maybe still not completely.
The fire will always be a part of my life.
That doesn't change.
But slowly, something else changed.
The memory lost some of its power.

Not its meaning.

Not its sorrow.
But its might.
That difference turned out to be greater than I ever thought.
Sometimes I still think back to that night.
To the smoke.
To the sirens.
To Moppie.
To the neighbor boy who fetched help.
To the ambulance.
But nowadays that memory no longer ends with the fire.
It ends here.
In a room in a clinic.
With a woman of forty-three writing down her story.
And perhaps that is ultimately what recovery is.
Not that the past disappears.
But that the past no longer determines the end of the story.

Chapter 37 ĩ½ Learning to Live

Chapter 37 ĩ½ Learning to Live

For years, I thought that surviving was the same as living.

You get up.

You seize the day.

You go to sleep.

And the next morning, you start again.

Was that living?

At least, that ĩ½s what I thought.

Only in the clinic did I slowly begin to understand that there is a difference.

A significant difference, in fact.

Surviving is about getting through today.

Living is about daring to see tomorrow.

The latter was harder for me.

Much harder.

I had become accustomed to crisis.

To solving problems.

To pushing through.

To being strong.

But what do you do when suddenly there is space?

When you don ĩ½t have to react solely to what ĩ½s happening?

When someone asks:

"What do you actually want?"

That turned out to be a difficult question.

Perhaps the hardest I had ever received.

What did I actually want?

For years, I had mainly known what I didn ĩ½t want.

No conflict.

No loss.

No pain.

No chaos.

But what did I want?

At first, the answers were small.
Sleeping well.
Peace in my mind.
Taking a walk without constantly looking back.
Later, other answers emerged.
A future.
Maybe a job.
Maybe a house.
Maybe just a normal life.
Normal.
Whatever that precisely means.
I began to rediscover things I had long lost.
Music, for example.
Not as background noise.
But truly listening.
Truly feeling.
Sometimes I thought back to Hyde Park.
To that evening when I felt happiness for the first time in years.
I thought of Rome.
Of the warm nights.
Of the guitar.
Of the nameless man making music as if the world didn't exist.
I thought of Paris.
Of the Seine.
Of the long walks.
Even of the difficult moments.
Slowly, I began to understand that my life wasn't only made up of sorrow.
I had believed that for a long time.
But there had also been other chapters.
Love.
Music.
Travel.
Humor.
People who had been important.
Trauma tends to take up all the space.
As if it's the only story that matters.
But my life was bigger than my trauma.
Bigger than my losses.
Bigger than my mistakes.
That didn't mean that difficult memories disappeared.
They were still there.

Sometimes very clearly.
Sometimes unexpectedly.
But they were no longer in the driver's seat.
That difference felt enormous.
I also began to look at myself differently.
More cautiously.
Maybe more gently.
Not just as someone who had done things wrong.
But also as someone who had been through a lot.
Someone who had tried very hard to survive for a long time.
That didn't make everything right.
But it made some things more understandable.
Sometimes I walked through the clinic's garden and thought of the girl with the blue bicycle.
About Martin.
About my mother.
About my father.
About the young woman in Hyde Park.
About the walker in Paris.
All those people had been me.
And somewhere, they were all still there.
I am now forty-three years old.
That sometimes feels old.
And sometimes not at all.
Sometimes it feels as if I have lived multiple lives.
Maybe I have.
But for the first time in a long time, it feels like there are still chapters ahead of me.
Not just chapters behind me.
That thought still scares me.
Hope is sometimes frightening when you've lost so much.
Because hoping also means that you have something to lose again.
Still, I try.
Every day anew.
Not grand.
Not spectacular.
Just small hope.
A good day.
A conversation.
A walk.
A song that comes at just the right moment.
Maybe recovery ultimately consists of those kinds of things.

Not one great miracle.
But hundreds of small moments in which you choose to move forward again.
My story is not over yet.
I now know for certain.
I don't know what the next chapters will look like.
Maybe difficult.
Maybe beautiful.
Probably both.
But for the first time in a very long time, I believe that they will be there.
And honestly, that is more hope than I ever expected to find again.

Chapter 38 ĩ½ Tomorrow Still Exists

****Chapter 38 ĩ½ Tomorrow Still Exists****

I used to not think much about the future.

Not because I didn't want to.

But because I often needed all my energy just to get through the day.

When you're mostly focused on surviving, next week can sometimes feel very far away.

Let alone next year.

In the clinic, that slowly changed.

Not all at once.

Not on a morning when I woke up and thought:

from today on, everything will be fine.

That's not how recovery works.

Recovery resembles spring.

At first, you hardly notice anything.

Then you see a small green leaf somewhere.

A few days later, another one.

And suddenly you realize that winter may not last forever after all.

For me, that began with small things.

A good night's sleep.

A conversation that felt right.

A walk without haste.

A cup of coffee in the sun.

In the past, I probably wouldn't have even noticed those things.

Now they sometimes felt like small victories.

I started to think cautiously about later.

Not about big dreams.

Not yet.

Just about ordinary things.

Where do I want to live?
What kind of life do I want to lead?
What people do I want around me?
Who do I want to be?

Those turned out to be difficult questions.
But also beautiful questions.
Maybe because I hadn't asked them in years.
I often think of my mother.
Of Martin.
Of my father.
Not only with sadness.
Sometimes also with gratitude.
Because they are part of my story.
Because a part of them still walks with me.

I also often think of Hyde Park.
Of that evening when I thought everything was lost yet still felt happiness.
Of Rome.
Of the man with the guitar.
Of Paris and the Seine in the evening.
Sometimes I wonder how many lives a person can actually live in one lifetime.
I now think: more than you think.

I have been the girl with the blue bicycle.
The young woman who fled.
The traveler.
The patient.
The woman in the ambulance.
The woman in the clinic.
And maybe I'll become many more people.
I find that idea beautiful.

I am now forty-three years old.
That is old enough to know loss.
But young enough to still make new memories.
Maybe there's a trip in my future again someday.
Maybe not to London.
Not to Rome.
Not to Paris.
Maybe just somewhere I have never been.

Maybe love will come again one day.
Maybe friendship.
Maybe a small house with plants by the window.
A cat sleeping on the windowsill.
Music in the background.
Peace.
In the past, I would have found that a boring life.
Now it sounds like wealth.

I don't know what my future looks like.
No one knows that.
But for the first time in a long time, I have become curious enough to want to discover it.
And that feels like a victory.

My name is Angela.
I am forty-three years old.
I have lost people I loved.
I have left cities behind.
I have made mistakes.
I have survived.
But this story isn't only about what I have lost.
It is also about what remains.
Curiosity.
Perseverance.
Humor.
Hope.

Maybe those are ultimately the things that have kept lifting me up time and again.
Even when I thought they had disappeared.
The book is not finished.
Not for the reader.
And not for me either.
There are still chapters to come.
I know this not because someone promised it to me.
I know it because I am still here.
Because I am still writing.
Because I am still dreaming.
Because I am still looking ahead.
And maybe that is ultimately the most beautiful sentence of this entire story:

There will be a tomorrow.

Chapter 39 ĩĉ ½ The Little House

Chapter 39 ĩĉ ½ The Little House

Nowadays, I sometimes think about the future.
Not every day.
Not all the time.
But occasionally.
Cautiously.
As if you're cracking open a door to see what ĩĉ ½s behind it.
I know there are still steps to be taken.
Within the clinic, I first need to reach level 2.
Afterwards, perhaps more new steps will follow.
Bigger steps.
How quickly that will happen, nobody knows for sure.
It depends on treatments.
On conversations.
On assessments.
And ultimately, also on the judge.
I used to find that difficult.
Not knowing when something will happen.
Not knowing how long something will take.
Slowly, li ĉ ½m learning that some things take time.
More time than you might want, perhaps.
But sometimes just the time that is needed.

When I think of the future, I don't see a big house.
No expensive things.
No spectacular plans.
I see a little home.
A place that belongs to me.
A place where I can close the door behind me.
A place where I can make my own coffee in the morning.
Where music can play whenever I want.

Where silence can simply be silence.
Supported independent living.
With outpatient help when needed.
Not because I have failed.
But because people sometimes need help to build further.
I used to find that hard to admit.
Now I see it differently.
Perhaps strength isn't about doing everything on your own.
Perhaps strength is knowing when you need others.

I often think about my friends.
About people I haven't truly seen in a long time.
About ordinary conversations.
About drinking coffee together.
About laughing at things that aren't really funny.
And about my aunts.
Family that is still here.
Family that remains part of my story.
I look forward to those encounters.
Not grand.
Not complicated.
Just seeing each other.
Just being together again.
And maybe there will also be a cat again.
Or rather, a kitten.
After everything that has happened, that remains a difficult subject.
There is sorrow.
Longing.
Memories.
But there's also something else.
Love.
Perhaps a new kitten is not just a new pet.
Perhaps it's also a sign that I dare to care again.
That I dare to attach again.
That I dare to love again.

That might be the most exciting part of recovery for me.
Not learning to live again.
But daring to connect again.
I don't know when that day will come.
Nobody knows that.

Maybe in a year.

Maybe later.

Maybe sooner.

But for the first time in a long while, the future no longer feels like a closed door.

More like a long hallway with several doors that could still open.

And somewhere at the end of that hallway, I sometimes see it already.

A little home.

A cup of coffee on the table.

A cat on the windowsill.

A visit from friends.

An aunt dropping by.

And a woman of forty-three who is finally no longer just focused on surviving.

But on living.

How that will unfold, no one knows.

Not me.

Not the caregivers.

Not the judge.

But one thing I do know by now.

As long as there are still chapters to be written, the story is not over yet.

Chapter 40 ĩĵ½ Snifto

****Chapter 40 ĩĵ½ Snifto****

Alongside all the stories of loss, travel, and recovery, there is another part of me.

A creative part.

A part that makes music.

A part that still wants to create something new.

Music has been present my entire life.

In difficult times.

In good times.

In London.

In Rome.

In Paris.

And now here as well.

Sometimes music expresses things where words fall short.

Sometimes a melody can explain what a conversation fails to.

Perhaps that is why music has always remained.

Even when other things have disappeared.

These days I make music myself.

It brings peace.

Space.

And sometimes even hope.

For creating something feels different from losing something.

I even have my own website:

urlsnifto.eu

Snifto is my nickname.

But it has become more than just a nickname.

It is also my artist name.
A name I carry into music and creativity.

To me, Snifto means:
Super Natural Intelligence For The One.

At the age of twenty-eight, I had that name tattooed on my arm.
Not just for decoration.
But as something that belongs to me.
A part of my identity.
A name I chose myself.

By now, there are many tattoos on my body.
Every tattoo tells a story.
A memory.
A period.
A piece of my life.

Soon I want to get another one.
A dragon.
Not just any dragon.
But a dragon for my mother.
For her Chinese zodiac sign.

I find that idea beautiful.
Not as a farewell.
But rather as a connection.
As if she continues to walk a little with me in that way.

Perhaps tattoos are sometimes a kind of memory that you carry on your skin.
Not because you're afraid of forgetting something.
But because certain people and certain stories deserve to remain visible.

I have been many things in my life.
Daughter.
Sister.
Traveler.
Patient.
Survivor.

But I am also a musician.

Creator.
Dreamer.
And Snifto.

Perhaps that is ultimately what recovery means as well.
Not only discovering what you have lost.
But also rediscovering what has always been within you.
And making space for that.
Creating music from it.

And perhaps even daring to be a little proud of it.

Chapter 41 ½ The Studio in My Head

Chapter 41 ½ The Studio in My Head

People sometimes think that recovery consists solely of conversations.
Of therapy.
Of treatment plans.
Of reports and evaluations.
But for me, recovery also consists of music.
Music has always remained.
When people disappeared.
When cities were left behind.
When I sometimes lost myself.
Music stayed.
Sometimes I listened to music to escape.
Later, I began making music to get closer to myself.
A beat.
A melody.
A few words on paper.
Sometimes a track starts with almost nothing.
And ends up something that precisely articulates what I couldn't explain.
My stage name is Snifto.
It has been that way for years.
Not just a name I liked the sound of.
But a name with a meaning.

Snifto means for me:
Super Natural Intelligence For The One.
It became my nickname.
My artist name.
And eventually also a part of my identity.
At twenty-eight, I had the name tattooed on my arm.
A lasting memory.
Not on paper.

Not on a screen.
But on my skin.
By now, there are more tattoos on my body.
My life is almost written between them.
Memories.
Stories.
Periods.
People.
Some people keep memories in boxes in the attic.
I carry them with me.
Soon I want to get a new tattoo.
A dragon.
For my mother.

For her Chinese zodiac sign.
I think that's a beautiful idea.
Not because I have forgotten her.
But precisely because I have not forgotten her.
Maybe that dragon will fly along with me forever.
On my arm.
Through my life.
Through the chapters that are yet to come.
Next to music, I also have my own website:
urlsnifto.eu

Sometimes that feels small.
Just a website.
A name on the internet.
But sometimes it feels larger.
Like proof that I am more than my file.
More than my past.
More than the toughest chapters of my life.
I am also someone who creates.
Someone who writes.
Someone who makes music.
Someone with ideas.

Maybe that's the most beautiful part of creativity.
That it creates something new from things that hurt.
Sometimes I picture my future.
A small little home.

A cat on the windowsill.
A computer with music software open.
Speakers softly playing in the background.
Maybe I'm working on a new track.
Maybe on a new beat.
Maybe just on an idea that still needs to grow.
And maybe on the door, there's simply one name.
Snifto.
Not just an artist name.
Not just a nickname.
But a reminder of someone who has lost much, experienced a lot, and yet continued
to create.
Still continued to dream.
Still continued to build.
Maybe that's ultimately what music means to me.
Not escaping from life.
But finding a way to tell it.
Beat by beat.
Track by track.
Chapter by chapter.

"My name is Angela. This is my story."

Snifto

snifto.eu