

Between Shadow and Hope

Tussen schaduw en hoop

Angela Snifto

Contents

1. Born in Unrest
2. Old Bike Thief
3. Martin
4. The Belt
5. Two Houses
6. Bertus
7. Away from Home
8. Nowhere Completely Home
9. The Teenage Years
10. The Escape
11. London
12. Hyde Park
13. The Road to Rome
14. The Heatwave
15. The Man with the Guitar
16. Paris
17. Wandering without a Destination
18. The First Winter
19. The First Fever
20. Two Months Ill
21. The Platform
22. Back to the Netherlands
23. Losing Martin Again
24. My Mother
25. Valentine's Day 2012
26. The House without Parents
27. Numbing
28. November 2023
29. High Care

30. Waiting
31. The First Day in the Clinic
32. The First EMDR Session
33. The Girl of Five
34. My Mother Appears Again
35. My Father Appears Again
36. The Fire Returns
37. Learning to Live
38. Tomorrow Still Exists
39. The Little House
40. Snifto
41. The Studio in My Head

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Born in Unrest

My name is Angela.

I am forty-three years old as I write this.

My story actually begins before I was even born.

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

My mother was often lonely.

My father was almost never there.

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

I only saw a father and a mother.

And I loved them both.

I also had a brother, Martin.

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

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

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

One of those memories is about a blue bicycle.

I was three years old and was wandering around in a place where I really wasn't supposed to be.

There I saw a beautiful blue bicycle standing.

I thought that bicycle was wonderful.

In my head I had probably already decided it was mine.

While I was busy with it, a garage door suddenly slammed shut on my finger.

That hurt terribly.

I cried as hard as I could.

Years later it became a family story.

My nickname became: "Old Bike Thief."

And honestly, later I had to laugh at it myself.

But not all memories from that time were funny.

There were also arguments. Many arguments.

I remember shouting.

I remember tension.

I remember being afraid often, without knowing exactly why.

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

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

My mother tried to protect him.

She shouted at my father to stop.

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

I have never forgotten that image.

When I was four years old, my parents divorced.

For a child, something like that feels as if the world suddenly changes.

From one day to the next there were two houses.

Two families.

Two lives.

Shortly after, my parents both remarried.

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

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

I was only a little girl.

I didn't understand much of what happened.

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

And that I wanted everyone to be happy again.

That didn't happen.

But as a child you keep hoping.

Perhaps that was my greatest strength.

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

I didn't know yet how much more would cross my path.

I didn't know I would have to move many more times.

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

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

I was just Angela.

A little girl trying to find her place in a world that often felt bigger and harder than herself.

Old Bike Thief

My first real memory has the color blue.

Not the blue of the sky above a summer day.

Not the blue of water.

But the blue of a child's bicycle.

A small bicycle with a shiny handlebar and tires that looked as if they had never seen a speck of mud.

I was three years old.

At least, that's what the stories say.

With memories from that time you never know for sure.

Sometimes I wonder how much I still remember myself and how much I heard so often later that it has now become my own memory.

But I still see that bicycle.

As if it were yesterday.

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

Forbidden territory.

Those were words adults used.

For children, those words often mean something else entirely.

Forbidden means interesting.

Forbidden means adventure.

Forbidden means there's probably something special to be found there.

And special it certainly was.

There it stood.

In the middle of my small world.

A blue bicycle.

I still remember the sun shining on it.

The handlebar gleaming.

Me standing still to look at it.

It was probably not a special bicycle at all.

Maybe it was even old.

Maybe there was rust on it.

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

Children think simply.

Maybe I thought: "What a beautiful bicycle."

Maybe I thought: "I want a bicycle like that too."

Or maybe I thought nothing at all and just walked toward it because children are curious by nature.

Before I knew it I was standing close.

And then it happened.

A heavy garage door slammed shut.

Right on my finger.

The pain came immediately.

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 fully convinced the end of the world has arrived.

In retrospect it must have looked quite comical.

A little girl.

A blue bicycle.

A swollen finger.

And an enormous amount of drama.

My family in any case found it a wonderful story.

For years it kept coming back at birthdays.

"Tell us again about that bicycle."

"Angela used to want to collect bicycles already."

"Our little bike thief."

And so my nickname was born.

Old Bike Thief.

As a child I found it terrible.

I didn't want to be a bike thief.

I wanted to be taken seriously.

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

But as with many things, that changed later.

When I got older I started to laugh at it myself too.

Actually that nickname just belonged to me.

Martin found it especially wonderful.

My brother was ten years older than me.

When I was three, he was already thirteen.

In my eyes that was about the same as being an adult.

He liked to use my nickname.

Especially when there was company.

Then he'd look at me with a grin and say: "Keep a good eye on your bike, now."

Or: "Better lock it up when Angela's around."

I would get angry.

Or pretend to be angry.

Because deep down I found it funny too.

Martin was my hero.

That may sound exaggerated.

But for a little girl, a brother of thirteen is almost a superhero.

He knew things I didn't know.

He could do things I couldn't.

He was allowed to do things I wasn't allowed to for a long time yet.

I often followed him around.

Not literally always.

But in my head.

When he found something beautiful, I found it beautiful too.

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

When he was enthusiastic about something, I became that too.

Maybe that's what little sisters do.

Maybe that's just part of it.

Not all memories from that time are so light.

I also remember tension.

The atmosphere in the house.

The silence before an argument began.

The way voices slowly grew louder.

Children may not understand what arguments are about.

But they understand perfectly when something is wrong.

I often knew how an evening would go before a single word had been said.

From the way a door closed.

From footsteps on the stairs.

From the way someone put down a cup.

I learned early to read moods.

Not because someone taught me.

But because it felt safe to be prepared.

Yet I was also just a child.

I played outside.

I collected pebbles I found special.

I could spend hours watching insects in the grass.

I made mud pies.

I chased pigeons as if I'd ever be fast enough to catch one.

Sometimes I almost forget that.

Because difficult memories often speak louder than beautiful ones.

But those beautiful moments were there too.

And they deserve a place in my story too.

When I look back now at that little girl I see curiosity.

I see a child who wanted to discover the world.

A child who believed people were good.

A child who thought parents could solve everything.

She didn't know yet how much more would happen.

She knew only the here and now.

A blue bicycle.

A painful finger.

A big brother who teased her.

And a nickname that would last a lifetime.

Old Bike Thief.

And honestly, I now find that quite a beautiful nickname.

Martin

My brother Martin was ten years older than me.

When I was three, he was already thirteen.

For a little girl that's about the same as being grown up.

He seemed big.

Strong.

Invincible.

He knew things I didn't know.

He was allowed to do things I wasn't.

And he could do things I couldn't yet.

To me he was a hero.

Not because he was famous.

Not because he did special things.

Just because he was my big brother.

That was enough.

I looked up to him.

When Martin had to laugh about 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 before he said anything.

Maybe because I've always been good at reading people.

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

Martin had his own life.

His own friends.

His own problems.

But to me he always remained simply my brother.

The boy who had always been there.

The boy who called me bike thief.

The boy who sometimes teased me and sometimes protected me.

I remember ordinary moments.

And precisely those ordinary moments I miss the most now.

Watching television together.

Sitting at the table together.

Laughing together at something stupid on TV.

Those kinds of memories seem small.

Until someone is no longer there.

Then it turns out those small memories are worth gold.

Home wasn't always calm.

There was tension.

Arguments.

Shouting.

And usually Martin got the most of it.

He was older.

He had opinions more often.

He stood up for himself more often.

And sometimes that collided with my father.

I remember the tension in the house.

The silence just before an argument started.

My mother worrying.

My father getting angry.

And Martin standing in the middle of it.

Sometimes Martin was beaten.

I was still small.

Too small to understand why.

I only knew I found it terrible.

I only knew I was afraid.

My mother tried to protect us.

She stood up for Martin.

She shouted back.

She refused to stay silent when her children were being 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.

For everything to be normal again.

Maybe that's what children want most.

Not toys.

Not presents.

But peace.

When my parents divorced, a lot changed.

For Martin too.

Not only for me.

The years passed.

Martin got older.

I got older.

Our lives changed.

But in my head he always remained a bit that big brother from back then.

And then came the news no one wants to hear.

Martin died.

Twenty-two years old.

Twenty-two.

That number still feels wrong.

Too small.

Too young.

Too early.

I remember it felt as if the world stood still for a moment.

As if someone had torn a chapter out of my life.

My big brother was gone.

Just gone.

The strange thing about loss is that the world simply goes on.

People go to work.

Cars drive past.

The sun comes up.

The supermarket opens.

As if nothing has happened.

While your world has completely changed.

I remember thinking:

How can the world just go on while Martin is no longer here?

His room was empty.

His voice was silent.

No more jokes.

No more teasing.

No more "old bike thief."

Only silence.

And silence can sometimes hit harder than shouting ever did.

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.

Sometimes just like that.

Out of nowhere.

Then I see him again.

My big brother.

My hero from back then.

And for a moment it seems as if he's still here.

Maybe people never really disappear.

Maybe they only change place.

From beside you to in your memories.

From a voice in a room to a voice in your head.

What I do know for certain is this:

I have never forgotten him.

And that will never happen.

Because before Martin became a memory, he was my brother.

And that he will always remain.

The Belt

Some memories have no image.

They have a sound.

A door closing too hard.

Footsteps on the stairs.

A voice that suddenly sounds louder than normal.

A chair shifting across the floor.

I think everyone who grew up in a house with many arguments recognizes that sound.

That moment when you feel something is about to happen before it happens.

I had become surprisingly good at that as a child.

Perhaps too good.

My father wasn't always angry.

That's important to say.

Because memories have a tendency to reduce people to 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 get 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 more softly.

Or stopped speaking altogether.

Martin usually got the most of it.

He was older.

He had opinions.

He sometimes dared to talk back.

He was no longer a small child who simply accepted everything.

And that led to collisions.

I no longer remember exactly what 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 interfering.

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 then 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 I found it terrible.

I only knew I didn't want Martin to be in pain.

I only knew I wanted everyone to stop shouting.

My mother stood up for him.

Always.

She shouted back.

She stepped between them.

She defended her children.

I've always admired that.

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

I have never forgotten that image.

Not because I remember every detail.

But because some moments fix themselves in your memory.

As if your head decides: You may never forget this.

I remember being afraid.

Really afraid.

Not the fear of monsters under the bed.

Not the fear of the dark.

But the fear that adults suddenly no longer feel safe.

Maybe that was the first time I realized that big people can't solve everything.

That parents make mistakes.

Sometimes big mistakes.

I began reading people early.

I often knew how an evening would go before a single word had been spoken.

From a glance.

From a sigh.

From a door.

From silence.

Especially silence.

That watchfulness would stay with me for a long time.

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 have been hurt by that person.

Those two things can exist side by side.

However difficult that sometimes is.

The arguments grew worse.

My parents grew apart.

I felt that without really understanding it.

I only felt that something was breaking.

Something that could no longer be fixed.

When I was four years old my parents divorced.

I remember not quite understanding what that meant.

Divorce was a big word for a little girl.

I only knew that daddy no longer lived at home.

That mama was sad.

And that nothing felt the same anymore.

Adults often say: "Children are resilient."

That's true.

But children also remember much more than adults sometimes think.

I especially remember the feeling.

The feeling that the ground beneath my feet had suddenly become less solid.

As if the world I knew was slowly falling apart.

I didn't know yet that this was only the beginning.

That more farewells would follow.

More loss.

More moves.

More starting over.

But somewhere amid all the chaos there was also a little girl who kept hoping.

Children are good at hoping.

Perhaps better than adults.

Maybe that hope ultimately got me through more than I will ever know.

Two Houses

After the divorce everything changed.

Not suddenly.

Not from one day to the next.

But slowly enough to only understand it once it had already happened.

First there were suddenly boxes in the house.

Then things disappeared.

Then there was whispering when I came in.

And eventually there was suddenly one home less.

Or rather, one home less.

I was four years old.

Four-year-old children don't understand divorces.

They only understand that daddy is gone.

My father moved on with the woman he'd been having a relationship with for years.

She became my stepmother.

My mother also found love again.

Bertus.

A calm truck driver.

A man with big hands, a quiet voice, and a laugh you didn't need to trust because it felt familiar on its own.

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

That may sound strange.

But there are different kinds of silence.

There is the silence before an argument.

And there is the silence of peace.

Bertus belonged to the second kind.

My father now lived somewhere else.

My mother lived somewhere else.

And I suddenly belonged to both.

And at the same time sometimes to neither.

I got two houses.

Two front doors.

Two kitchens.

Two sets of rules.

Two worlds.

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 a child's job.

I think in those years I began to adapt.

To watch.

To feel.

To try to keep everyone satisfied.

That's 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 the other.

Not entirely here.

Not entirely there.

But always on the way.

Maybe my life between worlds began there.

Between houses.

Between people.

Between departures and returns.

Bertus

Some people walk into a room and you immediately feel how they are.

Not by what they say.

But by how they look.

How they walk.

How they can be quiet without that silence becoming heavy.

Bertus was one of those people.

When my mother met him I was still young.

Young enough not to understand exactly 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 actually was.

Bertus was a truck driver.

To me that sounded like one of the most exciting professions in the world.

They drove 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 runs, he often smelled of coffee, diesel, and fresh outside air.

I still sometimes think of that scent.

It's strange how memories work.

Sometimes you forget entire years.

And sometimes the scent of a jacket stays with you your whole life.

He told stories about Germany.

About France.

About parking lots full of trucks.

About drivers who helped each other on the road.

I hung on his every word.

To me they were stories from another world.

What I perhaps found most special was his calm.

He didn't shout.

He didn't slam doors.

He didn't walk through the house angry.

He was simply... calm.

That sounds like something small.

But to me it felt big.

Very big.

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 get angry to be heard.

That safety sometimes simply means you can relax without realizing it.

With Bertus I didn't constantly have to watch how someone was feeling.

I could just be a child.

Sometimes he drank coffee at the table while the radio played softly.

My mother walked through the house.

I played somewhere on the floor.

And for a moment everything felt normal.

Just normal.

My mother laughed more often in that time.

I remember that well.

And when your mother laughs, as a child the world automatically feels safer.

But life had other plans.

It often did.

Just when I started to believe that peace might stay, everything changed again.

My mother got sick.

Seriously sick.

I remember conversations that stopped when I came in.

The looks of adults.

The silence at the table.

The whispering.

Children often don't hear what's being said.

But they feel exactly what isn't being said.

One day I heard I had to live somewhere else temporarily.

First with my godmother.

Later with my father and stepmother.

Until my mother would get better.

I only knew 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 get no choice.

They go where adults say they must go.

And meanwhile hope everything turns out fine.

Away from Home

I no longer 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 afraid.

My mother was sick.

Seriously sick.

Adults used words I didn't quite understand.

Hospital.

Tests.

Rest.

Wait and see.

Words that mean something to adults, but to children mostly sound like bad news.

I remember my mother seeming tired.

More tired than usual.

Not ordinary tiredness.

A deeper tiredness.

As if her body was slowly fighting a battle I understood nothing of.

I was afraid.

Not because someone told me to be afraid.

But because children feel when the world of adults starts to wobble.

First I went to my godmother.

I especially remember the feeling that I didn't really belong there.

As if I were a guest who stayed too long.

I tried to be as little trouble as possible.

I tidied up my things.

I made myself small.

I tried to become invisible.

That's something I would do more often later.

Becoming small.

Not standing out.

Causing no problems.

After a while I moved again.

This time to my father and stepmother.

I missed my mother.

Every day.

I wondered how she was doing.

Whether she thought of me.

Whether she was getting better.

Whether I could go home again soon.

A lot was said about my mother.

Not always positive.

I found that difficult.

Because I loved her.

Still.

Always.

As a child you don't want to choose between people you love.

But sometimes it felt like I had to.

I didn't know how to deal with that.

So I did what I often did.

I kept my mouth shut.

I began keeping more and more things to myself.

My sorrow.

My fear.

My questions.

Maybe that's where my habit of carrying everything alone began.

And then finally came the news I'd been waiting for so long.

My mother was getting better.

I was allowed to go home again.

I remember feeling relieved.

Truly relieved.

As if after months I could finally breathe out again.

For a child, home is sometimes not a house.

Not a street.

Not a bedroom.

Sometimes home is simply one person.

For me that was my mother.

Yet something had changed.

I felt it.

I had learned that people can get sick.

That people can disappear.

That home is not self-evident.

That safety can be temporary.

Those are big lessons for a little girl.

Maybe too big.

But I carried them with me from that moment on.

Nowhere Completely Home

When I moved back in with my mother and Bertus, I thought everything would become normal again.

Children often think difficult periods have a clear end.

That a day comes when everything goes back to the way it was.

But that's not usually how life works.

Some things pass.

Other things quietly travel along with you.

I went back to school.

I played outside again.

From the outside my life probably looked fairly normal.

But inside I felt different than before.

More cautious.

As if a part of me was always on the lookout.

I began to get better and better at adapting.

With my mother I was different than with my father.

At school I was different again.

With friends different again.

As if I had a different version of myself for every place.

I think many children from difficult families recognize that.

You learn to watch what people expect of you.

And then try to become that.

I began listening to more music.

A lot of music.

Music was more honest than people.

Music asked no questions.

Music didn't judge.

Music was simply there.

Some songs felt as if someone understood exactly what I myself couldn't explain.

Sorrow.

Confusion.

Loneliness.

Hope.

Everything was hidden somewhere in music.

I daydreamed a lot.

About traveling.

About freedom.

About a life where I would finally find peace.

Sometimes I imagined living somewhere else later.

Another city.

Another country perhaps.

A place where no one knew my past.

Where I could start over.

That idea felt pleasant.

The feeling of being on the way slowly became a part of me.

As if I didn't fully belong anywhere.

But also wasn't entirely not belonging anywhere either.

I think that feeling played a big role in my life later.

Maybe that's why traveling appealed to me so much.

Maybe that's why London, Rome, and Paris later felt so natural.

Being on the way I'd known much longer.

There were of course also beautiful moments.

Girlfriends.

Laughing in the schoolyard.

Summer days that seemed to last endlessly.

Cycling without a destination.

It's important not to lose those memories.

Because my childhood didn't consist only of difficult things.

There were also ordinary days.

And ordinary days can sometimes be very special.

The Teenage Years

My teenage years didn't come slowly.

They were suddenly there.

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

Only I didn't feel grown up at all.

I mostly felt insecure.

At school everything started to matter more.

Friendships.

Groups.

Who was popular.

Who belonged.

Who didn't.

Those things seem small later.

But as a teenager they're enormous.

I sometimes belonged.

And sometimes didn't.

I was never the loudest girl in the class.

Never the one who stood in the middle of everything.

I preferred to first see how people were.

I'd been doing that my whole life really.

I'd become good at reading people.

Perhaps too good.

I could often see from a face how someone was feeling.

I heard it in a voice.

I saw it in a glance.

I began listening to more music.

A lot of music.

Music was more honest than people.

Music asked no questions.

Music didn't judge.

Music was simply there.

I daydreamed a lot.

About traveling.

About freedom.

About a life where I would finally find peace.

I fell in love.

Like almost everyone falls in love at some point.

With butterflies in my stomach.

With sleepless nights.

Falling in love is beautiful.

But also dangerous.

Especially when you want so badly to be seen that you forget to listen well to yourself.

In the beginning everything seemed beautiful.

As often happens.

Slowly things changed.

First small things.

Then bigger things.

Anger.

Control.

Jealousy.

Rage.

In the beginning you look for excuses.

But some things don't get better.

Some things only get bigger.

I began to lose myself.

To become more cautious.

To become smaller.

To be busy again with reading moods.

And suddenly I realized something terrible.

I knew this already.

Not exactly the same.

But I knew the feeling.

That feeling of walking on your toes.

That feeling of tension in the house.

That was the moment I began to understand I had to leave.

I was nineteen years old.

I had no grand plan.

No pile of money.

No certainty.

Only an enormous longing to get away.

Looking back I think I wasn't only running from someone.

I was also running toward something.

Freedom perhaps.

Peace.

Or simply breathing room.

The Escape

The morning I left felt strange.

Not like an adventure.

Not like a vacation.

And not like freedom.

Not yet.

It mostly felt as if 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 busy with getting away.

I had no big suitcase.

No detailed plan.

No route mapped out.

Only the feeling I had to go before I lost myself completely.

I remember looking back.

Not long.

Just briefly.

Because saying goodbye remains strange.

Even when you're saying goodbye to something that hurt you.

During the journey I felt for the first time in a long time something like peace.

Not real peace.

More breathing room.

As if oxygen was finally coming back into my life.

In that period I listened to a lot of music.

More than ever perhaps.

Music had become my travel companion.

There was one band I listened to especially much.

Their music had been there during difficult moments.

During sleepless nights.

During days I didn't know how to go on.

Sometimes music feels as if someone opens a window in a room where you've been without air for years.

That's what that band was for me.

Through a truck driver I unexpectedly got a VIP ticket for a concert in London.

It still sounds like something from a movie.

I decided to go.

Not because I knew what I'd do afterwards.

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

Maybe that was my first real step toward freedom.

Not the running away itself.

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

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

Curiosity.

Excitement.

Anticipation.

I was on the way.

Truly on the way.

London

London smelled different than the Netherlands.

That was perhaps the first thing I noticed.

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

Everything moved.

Cars.

Buses.

People.

Even the sky seemed to move 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 talking to each other in all kinds of languages.

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

I felt small.

But in a good way.

In a big city you're one face among millions of others.

No one knows your history.

No one knows your mistakes.

No one knows what you fled from.

Strangely enough that felt safe.

I walked for hours through the city.

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.

And for the first time in years I felt a little alive.

The concert was getting closer.

I thought about it constantly.

Maybe because music had been my refuge for so long.

Maybe because this felt more like a reward than a concert.

I had a VIP ticket.

Even now that still sounds strange.

Me, Angela, from the Netherlands.

With a VIP ticket in London.

Sometimes things happen that don't seem to fit the life you've had until then.

Hyde Park

The strange thing about beautiful moments is that you often already feel you'll never forget them while they're still happening.

That's the feeling I had there.

In the middle of Hyde Park.

Among thousands of strangers.

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

The first notes sounded across the grounds.

The sound rolled through the crowd like a wave.

Thousands of people began to cheer at the same time.

I felt it literally in my chest.

Not only 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 brings people to places where words can't reach.

For me it was no different.

I thought of my mother.

Of Martin.

Of the little girl with the blue bicycle.

Of all the versions of myself I'd been on the way.

And yet it didn't feel sad.

Not that evening.

That evening everything felt light.

I especially remember the feeling of freedom.

That I didn't have to be afraid of anything.

That no one expected anything of me.

That I didn't have to go anywhere.

I didn't have to be strong.

Not careful.

I was allowed to simply exist.

That may sound small.

But to me it felt enormous.

Sometimes I think freedom doesn't mean you can do what you want.

Maybe freedom simply means you're not afraid for a moment.

The music grew louder.

The crowd began to sing louder.

Even people who didn't know each other put arms around each other.

For a few hours there was no past.

No future.

Only music.

I sang along.

Probably not beautifully.

But that didn't matter.

No one was listening to me.

Everyone was listening to the same thing.

Maybe that was the most beautiful thing about that evening.

That for the first time in a long time I didn't feel different from other people.

Not damaged.

Not lost.

Not alone.

Just someone among thousands of others.

Sometimes one evening can do more than years of explanation.

That evening gave me back something I'd lost somewhere along the way.

The feeling that the world was bigger than my problems.

That beautiful things still existed.

That life didn't consist only of loss.

That evening felt like a beginning.

Not of a solution.

Not of a happy ending.

But of a possibility.

And for the first time in a very long time I felt something I had almost forgotten.

Happiness.

Real happiness.

Not big.

Not perfect.

But real.

And that feeling I would never forget again.

The Road to Rome

After London it felt as if I could breathe again.

Not because my problems had disappeared.

But something had changed nonetheless.

The world felt bigger.

And I felt smaller.

In a pleasant way.

I had no strict plan.

No agenda.

No itinerary.

Only a direction.

South.

Further into Europe.

Further away from everything behind me.

I remember stations.

Many stations.

Departure boards.

People with suitcases.

People who belonged somewhere.

People being picked up by family or friends.

I often watched that.

Not out of jealousy.

More out of curiosity.

What would that feel like?

Having someone waiting for you.

On the way I looked out the window a lot.

Landscapes changed slowly.

Cities gave way to fields.

Fields gave way to mountains.

And somewhere along the way I noticed my shoulders were less tense.

For the first time in a long time I didn't have to be constantly alert.

There's something comforting about traveling.

No one expects anything of you.

No one asks who you were yesterday.

No one knows your history.

You're simply someone on the way.

Maybe that's why I loved traveling so much.

Maybe because I'd felt on the way my whole life.

When I finally entered Italy the light changed.

That sounds strange.

But it's true.

The light seemed warmer.

Softer.

As if the sun stood closer.

When I first saw Rome I didn't quite know what to feel.

The city was enormous.

Busy.

Loud.

Alive.

Rome smelled of coffee.

Of stone that held the day's warmth.

Of food from small restaurants where people stayed at tables for hours.

I walked for hours through the city.

And for the first time in a long time I felt I didn't have to be anywhere.

That was perhaps the greatest gift of that journey.

Time.

The Heatwave

The summer in Rome was different from anything I knew.

Not just warm.

Not a few degrees too much.

It was the kind of warmth that was everywhere.

In the streets.

In the buildings.

In the air.

Even the nights felt warm.

As if the city itself didn't want to let go of the sun.

During the day people sought the shade.

Terraces only filled up late in the evening.

Fountains became meeting places.

Water became more important than food.

I walked a lot.

Maybe too much.

But walking was free.

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

I walked past old buildings that had been standing long before the Netherlands existed.

Past churches.

Past squares.

Past street musicians playing for tourists who were in a hurry.

I began to love Rome.

Not because it was perfect.

But because it lived.

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 something extra.

It may sound poor.

But it didn't always feel that way.

Sometimes it felt as if I needed less than I'd ever thought.

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

That's how I ended up with a group of travelers and Romani people.

People who lived from day to day.

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

There was talking.

Laughing.

Food shared.

Stories told.

Not everyone spoke the same language.

But strangely enough that didn't seem to matter.

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

This was such a moment.

The evening slowly became night.

The warmth lingered between the buildings.

And somewhere a guitar appeared.

Then he began to play.

He didn't just play music.

He told stories without words.

Stories of love.

Of loss.

Of longing.

Of freedom.

I sat there and listened.

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

Not of home.

Not of the past.

Not of the future.

Only of that moment.

Some memories are great because something important happened.

Other memories are great because you were completely happy for a moment without realizing it.

This was such a memory.

The Man with the Guitar

Some people disappear from your life before you 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 one of those people.

He played without announcement.

Without applause.

Without seeking an audience.

He played because he played.

Maybe that was exactly why it was so beautiful.

Some musicians play notes.

Other musicians tell stories.

He belonged to the second group.

I remember thinking of Martin.

Of my mother.

Of home.

Of things I hadn't thought about in weeks.

That was the strange thing about his music.

It brought things up without it hurting.

Sometimes he looked up from his guitar and smiled at the people listening.

Not the smile of someone who wants to be admired.

More the smile of someone who's glad music exists.

One evening someone asked him why he hadn't become famous.

He shrugged and said: "Then I'd 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 busy with more.

More money.

More things.

More success.

He seemed content with what was.

That impressed me.

More than I realized at the time.

After a while I started thinking about traveling on.

Not because I was tired of Rome.

On the contrary.

Maybe precisely because I was afraid of staying too long.

I'd learned by then that beautiful things sometimes stay more beautiful when you let them go in time.

The thought of Paris began to grow slowly in my head.

Paris.

The city of artists.

Of writers.

Of music.

Of bridges over the Seine.

My last evening in Rome I went to listen one more time.

One more time that guitar.

One more time that warm air.

One more time that feeling of not having to be anywhere.

I never saw him again.

I don't know where he is now.

Whether he still plays.

Whether he's still alive.

But sometimes I hear a guitar somewhere and I'm suddenly back in Rome.

Back in that summer.

Back under that warm air.

Maybe that's what traveling does.

You don't collect places.

You collect pieces of people.

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

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 it thought of you.

My first impression was sound.

Trains.

Cars.

Sirens in the distance.

People in a hurry.

People who seemed to be in 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 honestly, those thoughts were sometimes heavy enough to carry on their own.

I didn't know where I'd sleep in a week.

Not where I'd be in a month.

I only knew I was here.

In Paris.

And that was enough for now.

The first days I mostly walked.

Walking was free.

And walking gave me the feeling I was going somewhere, even when I had no destination.

I walked along the Seine.

Past bridges I only knew from films.

Past artists drawing portraits of people who loved each other.

I looked at the city the way a child looks at a toy store.

Everything was new.

Everything was interesting.

Paris has a strange way of living.

People sit longer.

Talk longer.

Eat more slowly.

As if the city constantly tries to hold on to time.

I began to have small rituals.

A certain bench.

A certain route along the river.

A street where music always sounded.

Slowly the city became less strange.

I began to recognize faces.

Those are the moments when a city slowly turns into a place.

And a place slowly turns into something that resembles home.

Yet there was also another side.

The evenings.

During the day I could lose myself in the bustle of the city.

But in the evenings thoughts often returned.

I thought about the question that had been chasing me for years:

Where do I actually belong?

I didn't know yet that I would stay here three years.

That the city and I weren't done with each other yet.

Wandering without a Destination

After a few weeks in Paris I began to see the city differently.

No longer as a tourist.

No longer as a visitor.

But also not yet as a resident.

I was somewhere in between.

Like so often in my life.

My days slowly got a rhythm.

I walked a lot.

More than I'd ever walked.

Kilometers per 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 of people come and go.

Walking gave peace.

When I walked I thought less.

Or maybe I thought better.

I began to have fixed spots.

A bench where I liked to sit.

A street musician I ran into regularly.

A small bakery that always smelled of fresh bread.

Slowly Paris began to feel less big.

Not because the city changed.

But because I changed.

I began to recognize the city.

Sometimes I bought a roll and sat for hours by the Seine.

Watching boats.

Tourists.

Couples in love taking photos as if the world consisted only of that one moment.

There were days I felt rich.

Not from money.

Not from things.

But from time.

From freedom.

From a city that showed something new every day.

But there were also other days.

Quiet days.

Lonely days.

Loneliness in a big city feels different from loneliness in a quiet place.

In a big city you constantly see lives you're not part of.

Sometimes that hurt.

More than I wanted to admit.

Paris began to creep under my skin.

The smell of rain on warm stones.

The sound of the metro underground.

The street musicians by the bridges.

Sometimes I thought: Maybe I'll stay a little longer.

Another month.

Another few months.

I didn't know then it would eventually be three years.

Three years that would shape me.

Change me.

Break me.

And ultimately also make me stronger.

The First Winter

Summer slowly disappeared from Paris.

Not all at once.

Not with a big storm or sudden cold.

More as if the city slowly put on a different coat.

The evenings grew shorter.

The wind grew sharper.

The terraces emptied.

The trees along the Seine changed color.

First a little yellow.

Then orange.

Then brown.

Leaves swirled over the sidewalks while the city simply went on as if nothing had changed.

I noticed it mostly in the people.

In summer everyone stayed outside.

People sat on steps.

In parks.

By the water.

The city lived outside.

In winter everyone withdrew.

Windows closed.

Doors shut.

People disappeared inside faster.

Paris suddenly felt bigger.

And colder.

I still walked a lot.

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

Freedom and loneliness resemble each other more than people think.

Sometimes the difference is hard to see.

I thought more and more about the Netherlands.

About my mother.

About Bertus.

About Martin.

About home.

Yet I didn't want to go back yet.

Not because I didn't want to go home.

But because I didn't know where home exactly was.

Paris had changed me.

I felt that.

But I didn't yet know exactly how.

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 bit of tiredness.

And a thought almost everyone has had:

"It'll pass on its own."

This time it didn't pass on its own.

The First Fever

In the beginning it was just a cough.

Nothing more.

A dry cough that came up now and then when I walked through the cold air of Paris.

I paid little attention to it.

Everyone gets a cold sometime.

Everyone coughs sometime.

A few days later I felt tired.

Not ordinary tiredness.

More as if someone had unnoticed added weight to my shoulders.

I still walked through the city.

Still along the Seine.

But it suddenly cost more effort.

I told myself I just needed to sleep better.

Eat more.

Take it easier.

Tomorrow would surely be better.

Only tomorrow didn't become a better day.

The cough got worse.

Deeper.

Harder.

I slowly began to get scared.

Not of the illness itself perhaps.

But of the idea that I was alone.

Being sick is different when there's no one to ask how you are.

No one to make soup.

No one to say it'll be all right.

Then silence suddenly becomes very loud.

I had no insurance.

No doctor I could call.

No parents to pick me up.

No safe place to be sick.

That last part I found perhaps the most difficult.

Not the pain.

Not the fever.

But being alone.

Being sick makes people vulnerable.

And vulnerability feels very different when you have no one to fall back on.

What started as a cough would eventually grow into severe pneumonia.

A period in which even breathing sometimes felt like work.

And in which I was truly afraid for the first time that I might not make it.

Two Months Ill

I no longer remember exactly on which day I realized this was no ordinary flu anymore.

Maybe there was no clear day.

Maybe it happened slowly.

Like most bad things in life.

The cough stayed.

The fever stayed.

The exhaustion stayed.

And every morning I woke up hoping it would be better.

Every morning it turned out not to be.

My world grew smaller.

Much smaller.

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 I kept using them.

It lasted two months in the end.

Two months in which my world consisted of fever, coughing, and waiting.

And slowly, very slowly, my body began to fight back.

The fever came less often.

The cough grew less heavy.

Breathing hurt a little less.

I still remember the first morning I woke up feeling a little 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 stood still for a moment.

Breathed in deeply.

And breathed out again.

Never before had something so ordinary felt so special.

People often only realize how valuable something is when they've almost lost it.

For me that was breathing.

But something had changed.

Not only in my body.

Also in my head.

For the first time in my life I'd experienced how vulnerable a human truly is.

How quickly everything can change.

How little self-evident health actually is.

The Platform

After the pneumonia I walked through Paris again.

The city had stayed the same.

The bridges still stood in the same place.

The Seine still flowed through the middle of the city.

The street musicians still played their songs.

Only I had changed.

My body had slowly recovered.

My head much less.

I began to get tired more and more often in a way that's difficult to explain.

Not tired from walking.

Not tired from little sleep.

A different tiredness.

A tiredness that sat deeper.

Sometimes I walked for hours through the city without really seeing where I was.

I began to wonder more and more often where I was actually going.

Not that day.

Not that week.

But in my life.

Loneliness has a strange way of working.

In the beginning it feels like silence.

Later it feels like weight.

And at some point it feels as if you carry it everywhere with you.

One day I was standing on a metro platform in Paris.

I remember the sound of announcements.

The sound of braking trains.

People in a hurry.

People walking past each other without looking at each other.

And I especially remember how tired I was.

Not angry.

Not furious.

Just tired.

Tired of fighting.

Tired of carrying.

Tired of always going on.

Fortunately people around me saw it wasn't going well.

Something was done.

And looking back I'm grateful for that.

Sometimes you no longer see yourself how much help you need.

Until someone else sees it for you.

That day didn't end as I'd expected.

Not long after I was admitted to Saint-Anne hospital in Paris.

My father came to get me.

Our relationship hadn't always been easy.

We'd had difficult years.

But he came.

That's what I remember.

He came.

I remember seeing him and thinking:

I don't have to do this alone for a moment.

Together we left Paris.

The city where I'd lived for three years.

The city where I'd found freedom.

Where I'd been sick.

Where I'd wandered.

Where I'd almost disappeared.

I looked out once more during the journey back.

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.

Sometimes it's enough to see only the next step.

And that next step was homeward.

Back to the Netherlands

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

Maybe because then I was traveling toward somewhere.

And now I was coming from somewhere.

Those are two different kinds of journeys.

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

Landscapes passed by.

Fields.

Cities.

Stations.

My father and I didn't talk much.

That wasn't necessary.

Some silences are uncomfortable.

Other silences feel safe.

This was a safe silence.

When we entered the Netherlands it felt strange.

Familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

As if I'd come back 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 quite feel like home.

Not anymore.

I was no longer the same girl who'd left years before.

London had changed something.

Rome had changed something.

Paris had changed something.

And maybe life had done that most of all.

My father and I slowly found a way to deal with each other again.

Not perfect.

Not without effort.

But real.

Sometimes we drank coffee.

Sometimes we talked about the past.

Sometimes not at all.

I think we both tried to get to know each other again.

Not as father and little girl.

But as two people who had both grown older.

I thought the hardest part was behind me.

That Paris had been my heaviest chapter.

That I'd had the worst of it.

Life thought differently about that.

Because the years that followed would not only bring beautiful memories.

They would also bring farewells.

More farewells than I'd ever thought possible.

First Martin.

Then my mother.

And finally my father.

At that moment I didn't know that yet.

Then he was simply my father.

Sitting next to me.

On the way home.

And honestly that was enough at that moment.

Losing Martin Again

The strange thing about loss is that it often begins before someone dies.

Sometimes it begins with bad news.

Sometimes with a phone call.

Sometimes with a doctor's look trying to stay professional while you can already see the answer.

And sometimes it simply begins with fear.

The fear that someone who has always existed might not always keep existing.

For me Martin had never been just my brother.

He was my big brother.

My hero from back then.

The boy who called me old bike thief.

The boy who would always be older than me.

Always bigger.

Always stronger.

As a child you think big brothers don't die.

Actually you think that of everyone you love.

Martin died at twenty-two.

Twenty-two.

Even now that number feels wrong.

Incomplete.

As if numbers are missing.

Twenty-two is not an age to die.

Twenty-two is an age to make plans.

To fall in love.

To make mistakes.

To live.

I remember thinking:

This isn't right.

There must be some mistake.

But loss doesn't listen to what feels fair.

I remember the funeral.

The flowers.

The silence.

The people trying their best to find the right words.

But there are no right words for some things.

I looked at people who knew Martin.

Friends.

Family.

Acquaintances.

Everyone had lost their own Martin.

Loss has many faces.

After the funeral came the silence.

The real silence.

Not the silence of a ceremony.

But the silence of a phone that no longer rings.

A birthday that's never celebrated again.

A chair that stays empty.

Those are the moments loss makes itself felt hardest.

Not on the big days.

But on ordinary Tuesdays.

I still miss him.

Not every minute of every day like before.

But at unexpected moments.

And sometimes I still hear his voice in my head.

"Nice going, old bike thief."

Then I smile.

And for a moment it feels as if my big brother is still here.

Maybe he is.

In a different way.

But still.

Because before Martin became a memory, he was my brother.

And some things never change.

My Mother

My mother wasn't 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 first of sorrow.

I think of small things.

Of her voice.

Of her laugh.

Of the way she pronounced my name.

I think of coffee on the table.

Of ordinary conversations.

Of days that seemed normal then and turned out to be precious later.

My mother hadn't had an easy life.

She'd been through a lot.

More than many people will ever know.

And yet she kept going.

Sometimes I wonder where people get that strength.

Maybe from love.

Maybe from necessity.

Maybe from both.

Then came the illness.

Not suddenly.

Not with one big event.

More like a shadow slowly drawing closer.

I remember conversations where we pretended everything was normal.

Not because we wanted to fool each other.

But because ordinary conversations are sometimes a form of resistance against bad news.

You talk about the weather.

About television.

About food.

About small things.

While everyone knows there are bigger things present in the room.

My mother was fifty years old.

Fifty.

Far too young.

There are ages that feel logical.

And ages that feel wrong.

Fifty felt wrong.

I didn't only lose 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.

People sometimes ask when grief passes.

I don't think it passes.

I think it changes.

In the beginning grief is a storm.

Then it becomes rain.

Later it becomes something that's always present somewhere in the background.

Not visible every day.

But always part of the landscape.

My mother is no longer alive.

But her voice is still somewhere in my memories.

Her laugh too.

And maybe that's what people leave behind when they go.

Not only sorrow.

But also a part of themselves.

I've lost a lot in my life.

But I've never forgotten where I come from.

And a part of that will always remain hers.

Because she was my mother.

And that doesn't change with goodbye.

Not really.

Valentine's Day 2012

Some dates you never forget.

Not because you want to.

But because your life divides from that moment into a before and an after.

For me, Valentine's Day 2012 is such a date.

For many people that day stands for flowers.

For cards.

For love.

For us it became the day we heard my father had cancer.

I remember how strange that felt.

As if someone had mixed up two completely different stories.

Outside people bought gifts for each other.

Inside our world changed.

Cancer.

The word alone made the room smaller.

Quieter.

Heavier.

My father and I didn't have a simple history together.

There were difficult memories.

Difficult years.

Things that had caused pain.

But he was also my father.

And love rarely follows simple rules.

The weeks after went strangely fast and strangely slow at the same time.

I spent time with him.

Just being there.

Talking when he wanted to talk.

Being silent when silence was enough.

I often looked at him when he didn't notice.

As if I was trying to memorize his face.

Maybe people do that automatically when they feel time is becoming precious.

On February 28, 2012 my father died of cancer.

Two weeks after we'd gotten the news.

Two weeks.

More time we didn't get.

I was there.

I'm still grateful for that.

However difficult it was.

At the end I said to him:

"Dad, I love you."

He answered:

"I know that."

Three words.

Nothing more was 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 three words are enough to carry for years.

I loved him.

Very stiffly sometimes.

Very complicated sometimes.

But truly.

And I think he knew that.

Maybe that's ultimately enough.

The House without Parents

There's a moment in some people's lives when they realize no one stands above them anymore.

No more mother to call.

No more father to ask a question.

No parental home that's always waiting somewhere for you.

That moment came for me much earlier than I'd ever imagined.

After my father's death it slowly dawned on me.

My mother was no more.

My father was no more.

Martin was no more.

The people who belonged to my beginning had disappeared from my daily life.

That realization didn't come at once.

Grief rarely works that neatly.

It comes in waves.

Sometimes hard.

Sometimes soft.

Sometimes at moments you don't expect it at all.

I remember one day hearing something funny and automatically thinking:

I'll have to tell that later.

And right after I already knew that wasn't possible anymore.

Those are the moments loss shows itself.

Not during funerals.

Not during memorials.

But on Tuesdays.

In supermarkets.

During dinner.

In the car.

Ordinary moments.

A house is bricks.

A home is people.

And many of my people had disappeared.

I began 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 and more things to myself.

In the years after I began to slowly lose myself.

Alcohol first became a tool.

Then a habit.

And later something I began to lean on.

Drugs also came into my life.

Not because I was adventurous.

Not because I wanted to be tough.

But because pain sometimes seeks silence.

And substances promise that silence temporarily.

The problem is only that grief is patient.

It simply waits until the numbing wears off.

And every time it came back.

The emptiness.

The missing.

The questions.

What I do know is that even people who go astray sometimes keep searching for the way back.

Even when they don't yet know they're searching.

Maybe I was already doing that then.

Without realizing it.

Numbing

I no longer remember exactly when it began.

Maybe almost no one does.

There's rarely a day someone wakes up and decides:

from today I'm going to lose myself.

That's usually not how it works.

It happens slowly.

Almost unnoticed.

In the beginning it was simple.

A drink to relax.

An evening when I didn't have to think about anything for a while.

A few hours without memories pushing themselves forward.

And honestly is honestly.

In the beginning it worked.

Or at least, that's how it felt.

The sharp edges became softer.

My head grew quieter.

The voices of memories grew softer.

The emptiness felt less big.

That's perhaps exactly why so many people stay stuck.

Not because they're weak.

But because pain can be very convincing when it promises a way out.

Slowly something changed.

What was occasional became more frequent.

What was a choice became a habit.

I began to take less good care of myself.

Meals were skipped.

Days began and ended without real structure.

Friends slowly disappeared from view.

Not always through arguments.

Sometimes simply because I no longer answered calls.

Didn't read messages.

Postponed appointments until eventually there were no appointments left.

Grief is patient.

It waits calmly.

And when the numbing disappears, it often stands in exactly the same place.

I often thought of my mother.

Of Martin.

Of my father.

Of Paris.

Of everything I'd lost.

Of everything I'd wished differently.

Mourning has no end date.

I'd learned that by then.

But I didn't yet know how to live with it without running from it.

There were days I was tired of fighting.

Tired of being strong.

Tired of going on.

But somewhere, deep beneath everything I'd lost, there was still the same girl from back then.

The girl who kept hoping.

Even when hope had become very small.

Maybe that was ultimately the most important thing.

Not that I never went astray.

But that somewhere there was always still a small part of me that kept searching for the way back.

Even when I didn't yet know I'd lost it.

November 2023

November 2023 began as an ordinary month.

At least, so it seemed.

In retrospect there are often signs you only recognize later.

More tension.

Less sleep.

More unrest in my head.

The feeling I was constantly on edge.

I felt worse and worse.

Not physically.

Inside.

As if I'd been fighting for months without knowing exactly against what.

Fear and reality sometimes became difficult to distinguish.

I had the feeling I wasn't alone.

That someone was watching me.

That someone had been in my home or was hiding.

To me that felt very real at that moment.

At some point despair took over from thinking.

I set a blanket on fire.

I'd also turned on the gas.

Then I lay down on the bed.

Sometimes people ask afterwards why someone does such things.

But despair doesn't think logically.

Despair doesn't calculate.

Despair doesn't plan.

Despair mostly wants the pain to stop.

After about ten minutes the smoke was already high in the room.

Much faster than I'd expected.

At that moment I woke up from my thoughts and my confusion.

I wanted to live.

I wanted to get out.

And above all: I wanted to save my cats.

I went on my knees toward the window.

The smoke hung low and thick in the room.

Breathing became difficult.

One of the cats had hidden under the bed.

That one would ultimately survive.

Moppie.

Two other cats didn't make it.

That grief I still carry with me.

I eventually ran outside.

In panic.

In shock.

Outside sat a neighbor boy who immediately called emergency services.

The fire department was fortunately nearby.

In the same street even.

After the fire followed a period of admission.

I stayed about three months in a High Care ward.

My head needed rest.

My body too.

Then followed a period in detention.

About a year and a half I waited for a place within TBS.

Those were long months.

Months in which I thought a lot about my life.

About choices.

About loss.

About grief.

Eventually a place became available.

The clinic where I'm now writing this story.

Because even after fire.

Even after loss.

Even after despair.

Something can remain.

Hope.

Very small sometimes.

But strong enough to begin again.

High Care

The first days on High Care still feel as if I'm looking at someone else.

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

Images.

Sounds.

Fragments of conversations.

The rest is mist.

I remember doors.

Many doors.

Doors that locked.

Doors that opened at fixed times.

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

I remember the silence.

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

A different silence.

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

There were nurses.

Doctors.

Conversations.

Questions.

Many questions.

I was tired.

Deeply tired.

Not only of the events.

Not only of the months before.

Tired of years.

Of losses.

Of keeping going.

Of trying to be strong.

For the first time in a long time I didn't have to solve anything.

That felt strange.

Almost uncomfortable.

My days got structure.

Breakfast.

Medication.

Conversations.

Rest moments.

Dinner.

Sleep.

Structure sounds small.

But when your life has consisted of chaos for a long time, structure can feel like a lifebuoy.

Slowly I began to talk.

About my childhood.

About Martin.

About my mother.

About my father.

About Paris.

About everything I'd been carrying for years.

Some stories I'd never told out loud.

Not fully.

Not honestly.

The strange thing was that nothing changed when I told them.

The world didn't collapse.

The people opposite me didn't walk away.

They listened.

Just listened.

I'd underestimated how important that can be.

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.

When I look back at that period I see not only the darkest weeks of my life.

I also see the beginning of something else.

The beginning of letting help in.

The beginning of looking honestly at myself.

The beginning of recovery.

Not the end of my story.

Maybe precisely the beginning of a new chapter.

Waiting

After High Care came detention.

That sounds hard.

And honestly it felt hard too.

Not only the doors.

Not only the walls.

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

I'd had to wait about a year and a half for a place in a TBS clinic.

A year and a half.

That sounds short when you say it.

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 faster.

My life became small.

Very small.

I thought a lot.

Maybe more than was good for me.

About my childhood.

About Martin.

About my mother.

About my father.

About Paris.

About November 2023.

I also began writing more and more often.

Not because anyone asked.

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.

One day came the message I'd been waiting for so long.

There was a place available.

A TBS clinic.

But it also meant something else.

Help.

Treatment.

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

That looking forward I found perhaps the most difficult of all.

I'd grown so used to surviving that I'd almost forgotten what hoping felt like.

I was still here.

After everything that had happened.

After everything I'd lost.

I was still here.

And sometimes that's the first step of recovery.

Not that everything is good.

But simply that you're still here to begin again.

The First Day in the Clinic

The day I arrived at the clinic it was raining.

At least, that's how I remember it.

Maybe it really rained.

Maybe my head imagined rain afterwards because rain fit better with how I felt.

That happens more often with memories.

I looked out the window during the ride.

Trees.

Roads.

Buildings sliding past.

No one said much.

Neither did I.

I didn't quite know what to expect.

When I arrived I indeed saw fences.

Secure doors.

Cameras.

But I also saw something else.

People who said friendly hello.

Nurses who introduced themselves.

People who seemed to look not only at my file but also at me.

That felt strange.

I'd grown used to forms by then.

Reports.

Diagnoses.

Events.

But somewhere behind all those papers there 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 closet.

A desk.

A window.

I remember sitting on the bed and thinking:

So this is it then.

This is where I'll live for now.

That feeling was hard to explain.

Not only sorrow.

Not only relief.

More a kind of in-between space.

As if my old life was over and my new life hadn't quite begun yet.

In the first weeks I spoke little.

I mostly listened.

Mostly watched.

I'd done that as a child too.

First observe.

First understand where I'd ended up.

Slowly I got to know people.

Other patients.

Counselors.

People with their own stories.

Their own losses.

Their own battles.

That changed something in me.

Not because my own story became smaller.

But because I realized pain has many faces.

I was no longer alone.

And sometimes that's the beginning of everything.

The First EMDR Session

I'd heard about EMDR before I started it.

People said things like:

"It helps."

"It's heavy, but it works."

"You have to go through it to come out of it."

That all sounded nice.

But honestly I mostly knew I was afraid.

Afraid of memories.

Afraid of feelings.

Afraid of things I'd spent years trying not to feel.

Because that was ultimately what I'd done most of my life.

Going on.

Surviving.

Not dwelling too long.

Not looking too deep.

Not feeling too much.

The therapist calmly explained how it worked.

That memories can sometimes get stuck.

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

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

I sat in the chair and felt my hands sweating.

A part of me wanted to get up and leave.

Another part knew that was exactly why I had to stay.

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

And suddenly I was no longer forty-three.

I was small again.

Much smaller.

I found that perhaps the strangest thing about trauma.

You know you're safe.

You know you're in a room with a therapist.

You know it was years ago.

And yet your body sometimes feels as if it happened yesterday.

My heart started beating faster.

My shoulders grew tense.

My hands trembled a little.

For the first time in a long time I didn't try to run from a memory.

Not literally.

But also not in my head.

Afterward I was exhausted.

Truly exhausted.

But somewhere deep inside I felt something else too.

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 in myself.

And that was more than I'd had for a long time.

The Girl of Five

During EMDR something happened no one could really have prepared me for.

Not the memories themselves.

But the way they returned.

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

But also at who I was then.

Not Angela of forty-three.

Not Angela in the clinic.

But Angela from back then.

The girl who experienced everything.

The girl who felt everything.

And suddenly I saw her.

Not literally of course.

But in my thoughts.

A little girl.

Cautious.

Curious.

Always watching the people around her.

Always trying to understand how the world worked.

A girl who often thought difficult things were her own fault.

As children sometimes do.

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 maybe also pride.

Because despite everything she'd kept going.

She kept hoping.

Kept dreaming.

Kept searching for bright spots.

She found a blue bicycle the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

She could be happy from music in Hyde Park.

From a guitar in Rome.

From the lights on the Seine.

Somewhere along the way I'd forgotten how strong that actually was.

The therapist asked what I would want to say to her if she were sitting across from me now.

I thought for a long time.

And eventually I said:

"You don't have to carry everything alone."

I cried at that.

More than I'd expected.

Because maybe I wasn't saying those words only to the girl of five.

Maybe I was saying them to myself too.

I wasn't only the girl who had been afraid.

I was also the girl of the blue bicycle.

The woman in Hyde Park.

The traveler in Rome.

The walker in Paris.

The survivor of November 2023.

And maybe, just maybe, I began to slowly understand that all those versions of me were allowed to exist side by side.

Not as enemies.

But as chapters.

Because a book doesn't consist of one page.

And neither does a person.

My Mother Appears Again

Some people never really disappear.

They disappear from rooms.

From photos no longer taken.

From phone calls.

From birthdays.

But not from your head.

And certainly not from your heart.

During one of the EMDR sessions my mother suddenly returned.

Not literally of course.

But in memories.

In images.

In small moments I didn't even know I still carried with me.

I saw her hands.

That was the first thing that came back.

Strangely enough not her face.

Not her voice.

Her hands.

Hands that poured coffee.

Hands that unpacked groceries.

Hands that held me as a child when I was sad.

Then her voice came back.

Not the words.

Only the sound.

That familiar sound you think you've forgotten until it suddenly exists again somewhere in your head.

I cried.

Not because I discovered something new.

But because I realized how much I'd lost.

Loss doesn't happen once.

I'd learned that by then.

You lose someone again on birthdays.

On holidays.

With good news.

With bad news.

The therapist asked what I missed 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 together about nothing important at all.

Because ultimately a life consists mostly of ordinary days.

And precisely those ordinary days often disappear hardest when someone is no longer there.

When I think of her I don't want to think only of illness.

Not only of goodbye.

I also want to think of laughing.

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 my mother too.

She was here.

She was important.

She was loved.

And a part of her still walks with me.

Maybe that's what love ultimately does.

It stays.

Even when people have to go.

My Father Appears Again

My father was perhaps the most difficult memory to face.

Not because I'd forgotten him.

On the contrary.

Maybe precisely because he'd never really disappeared.

Some relationships are simple.

You love someone.

Or you don't love someone.

But family often works differently.

Family can contain 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, the difficult memories didn't come first.

But the first thing that returned was his voice.

Just his voice.

An ordinary memory.

An ordinary day.

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 difficult question.

But also an important one.

Because for years I'd thought I had to choose.

Be angry or love.

Forgive or remember.

Maybe that wasn't necessary at all.

Maybe those feelings were simply allowed to exist side by side.

I loved my father.

That's true.

Some things that happened caused pain.

That's also true.

Those two truths don't fight each other.

They simply exist side by side.

I thought back to Valentine's Day 2012.

To the news.

To the hospital rooms.

And of course I thought back to his last words.

"Dad, I love you."

"I know that."

Three words.

Nothing more.

But sometimes three words are enough to carry for years.

When the session was over I felt tired.

But tired differently than before.

Not empty.

More as if I'd set down a heavy bag I'd been carrying for years without noticing how heavy it had become.

My father died at sixty-two.

Far too early.

Like so many people I've lost.

But loss has one strange property.

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've never forgotten.

"I know that."

And maybe that was ultimately exactly what I needed to hear.

The Fire Returns

Some memories don't live in words.

They live 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.

But the fire felt different.

The fire was still too close.

Too fresh.

The therapist carefully asked me to think back to that day.

I mostly remember unrest.

Not one clear thought.

More a feeling that everything had become too much.

As if my head was a room where all the radios were on at once.

I slept poorly.

Thought a lot.

Felt hunted.

Then the images returned.

The room.

The smoke.

The smell.

Smell is strange.

You can smell nothing for years.

And then suddenly one scent brings you back to a moment you thought you'd 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 stands sharper in my memory than almost everything before.

On my knees through the smoke.

Searching.

Calling.

Trying.

During the session I began to cry when I spoke about my cats.

Not about myself.

Not about the fire.

About them.

Two of them didn't survive.

That grief sits deep.

Deeper than I sometimes understand myself.

Guilt often returned during therapy.

Much more often than anger.

Much more often than fear.

The therapist said something that stayed with me.

"Guilt often tries to make order out of chaos."

I had to think about that for a long time.

Because maybe guilt sometimes felt safer than powerlessness.

During one of the sessions the therapist asked:

"What would you say to someone else who had experienced exactly the same thing?"

I would say:

You were in need.

You were afraid.

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 to that.

Not then.

Maybe still not entirely.

The fire will always remain part of my life.

That doesn't change.

But slowly something else changed too.

The memory lost some of its power.

Not its meaning.

Not its grief.

But its power.

That difference turned out bigger than I'd ever thought.

And maybe that's ultimately what recovery is.

Not that the past disappears.

But that the past no longer determines the end of the story.

Learning to Live

For years I thought surviving was the same as living.

You get up.

You get through the day.

You go to sleep.

And the next morning you start again.

That was living, wasn't it?

At least, I thought so.

Only in the clinic did I slowly begin to understand there's a difference.

A big difference even.

Surviving is about getting through today.

Living is about daring to see tomorrow.

The latter I found more difficult.

Much more difficult.

I'd grown accustomed to crisis.

To solving problems.

To going on.

To being strong.

But what do you do when space suddenly opens up?

When someone asks:

"What do you actually want?"

That turned out to be a difficult question.

Maybe the most difficult I'd ever been given.

What did I actually want?

For years I'd mostly known what I didn't want.

No arguments.

No loss.

No pain.

No chaos.

But what did I want?

In the beginning the answers were small.

Sleep well.

Peace in my head.

Take a walk without constantly looking back.

Later other answers came.

A future.

Maybe work.

Maybe a house.

Maybe just a normal life.

Trauma has a tendency to claim all the space.

As if it's the only story that counts.

But my life was bigger than my trauma.

Bigger than my losses.

Bigger than my mistakes.

That didn't mean difficult memories disappeared.

They were still there.

Sometimes very clear.

Sometimes unexpectedly.

But they were no longer behind the steering wheel.

That difference felt enormous.

I also began to look at myself differently.

More cautiously.

More mildly perhaps.

Not only as someone who'd done things wrong.

But also as someone who'd been through a lot.

Someone who'd tried very hard for a very long time to survive.

That didn't make everything right.

But it made some things more understandable.

My story isn't over yet.

I know that by now.

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 they'll be there.

And honestly that's more hope than I ever expected to find again.

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 busy surviving, next week sometimes already feels very far away.

Let alone next year.

In the clinic that slowly changed.

Not suddenly.

Not on a morning when I woke up and thought: from today everything will be fine.

That's not how recovery works.

Recovery is more like spring.

First you barely notice anything.

Then you see a small green leaf somewhere.

A few days later another one.

And suddenly you realize winter maybe doesn't last forever after all.

For me it began with small things.

A night of good sleep.

A conversation that felt good.

A walk without hurry.

A cup of coffee in the sun.

Before I probably wouldn't even have noticed those things.

Now they sometimes felt like small victories.

I began cautiously thinking 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?

Which people do I want around me?

Who do I want to be myself?

Those turned out to be difficult questions.

But also beautiful questions.

Maybe because I hadn't asked them for years.

I still often think of my mother.

Of Martin.

Of my father.

Not only with sorrow.

Sometimes also with gratitude.

Because they're part of my story.

Because a part of them still walks with me.

Sometimes I wonder how many lives a person can actually live in one life.

I think by now: more than you think.

But for the first time in a long time I've become curious enough to want to find out.

And that feels like a victory.

My name is Angela.

I am forty-three years old.

I've lost people I loved.

I've left cities behind me.

I've made mistakes.

I've survived.

But this story isn't only about what I've lost.

It's also about what remains.

Curiosity.

Perseverance.

Humor.

Hope.

The book isn't finished yet.

Not for the reader.

And not for me either.

More chapters are coming.

And maybe that's ultimately the most beautiful sentence of this whole story:

There is still a tomorrow.

The Little House

Nowadays I sometimes think about later.

Not every day.

Not constantly.

But now and then.

Carefully.

As if you open a door a crack to see what's behind it.

I know there are still steps to be taken.

Within the clinic I first need to reach level 2.

After that maybe new steps follow.

Bigger steps.

How fast that goes no one knows exactly.

That depends on treatments.

On conversations.

On assessments.

And ultimately also on the judge.

I'm slowly learning that some things need time.

More time than you'd want perhaps.

But sometimes also exactly the time that's needed.

When I think about the future I don't see a big house.

No expensive things.

No spectacular plans.

I see a little house.

A place that's mine.

A place where the door can close behind me.

A place where I can make my own coffee in the morning.

Where music can play when I want.

Where silence can simply be silence.

Supported independent living.

With outpatient help when needed.

Not because I've failed.

But because people sometimes need help to build further.

I used to find it difficult to admit that.

Now I look at that differently.

Maybe strength isn't doing everything alone.

Maybe strength is knowing when you need others.

And maybe there will also be a cat again.

Or rather a kitten.

Maybe a new kitten isn't only a new pet.

Maybe it's also a sign I dare to care again.

That I dare to attach again.

That I dare to love again.

I find that perhaps the most exciting thing about recovery.

Not learning to live again.

But daring to connect again.

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

More like a long corridor with multiple doors that can still open.

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

A little house.

A cup of coffee on the table.

A cat on the windowsill.

A visit from friends.

An aunt who drops by.

And a woman of forty-three who's finally no longer busy only with surviving.

But with living.

As long as chapters can still be written, the story isn't over yet.

Snifto

Besides all the stories of loss, travel, and recovery, there's 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 whole life.

In difficult periods.

In good periods.

In London.

In Rome.

In Paris.

And now here too.

Sometimes music says things where words fall short.

Sometimes a melody can explain what a conversation can't.

Maybe that's why music has always stayed.

Even when other things disappeared.

I make my own music nowadays.

That gives peace.

Space.

And sometimes hope too.

Because making something feels different from losing something.

I even have my own website: snifto.eu

Snifto is my nickname.

But it's become more than just a nickname.

It's also my artist name.

A name I've carried into music and creativity.

To me Snifto means:

Super Natural Intelligence For The One.

At twenty-eight I had that name tattooed on my arm.

Not just as 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 a beautiful idea.

Not as a goodbye.

But precisely as a connection.

As if she walks along with me that way a little more.

I've been many things in my life.

Daughter.

Sister.

Traveler.

Patient.

Survivor.

But I'm also a musician.

Maker.

Dreamer.

And Snifto.

Maybe that's ultimately what recovery also means.

Not only discovering what you've lost.

But also rediscovering what has always been inside you.

And making room for that.

Making music for.

And maybe even daring to be a little proud.

The Studio in My Head

People sometimes think recovery consists only of conversations.

Of therapy.

Of treatment plans.

Of reports and evaluations.

But for me recovery also consists of music.

Music has always stayed.

When people disappeared.

When cities lay behind me.

When I sometimes lost myself.

Music stayed.

Sometimes I listened to music to escape.

Later I began making music to get closer to myself instead.

A beat.

A melody.

A few words on paper.

Sometimes a song begins with almost nothing.

And ends as something that says exactly what I couldn't explain myself.

My artist name is Snifto.

That's been the case for years.

Not just a name I liked the sound of.

But a name with a meaning.

To me Snifto means:

Super Natural Intelligence For The One.

It became my nickname.

My artist name.

And ultimately also a part of my identity.

At twenty-eight I had the name tattooed on my arm.

A memory forever.

Not on paper.

Not on a screen.

But on my skin.

Sometimes I imagine my future.

A little house.

A cat on the windowsill.

A computer with music software open.

Speakers playing softly in the background.

And maybe there's simply one name on the door.

Snifto.

Not only an artist name.

Not only a nickname.

But a reminder of someone who lost a lot, experienced a lot, and yet kept creating.

Yet kept dreaming.

Yet kept building.

Maybe that's ultimately what music means to me.

Not escaping life.

But finding a way to tell it.

Beat by beat.

Song by song.

Chapter by chapter.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue – The Future Is More Beautiful Than I Once Thought

If someone had told me earlier that at forty-three I'd be writing my life story from a TBS clinic, I probably wouldn't have believed it.

And if someone had told me that despite everything I'd still feel hope, I might have believed that even less.

My life hasn't gone the way I thought.

There were losses that came too early.

People I loved died.

There were journeys that began unexpectedly.

Cities that became my home.

And periods in which I almost lost myself.

I've learned that a person can carry more than they ever think.

But I've also learned that no one has to carry everything alone.

I'm not only the difficult chapters of my life.

Not only loss.

Not only sorrow.

Not only mistakes.

I'm also Hyde Park.

I'm Rome in summer.

I'm Paris at night.

I'm music.

I'm Snifto.

I'm the woman with the dreams that despite everything kept existing.

The future may not look the way I once imagined.

But maybe that's not so bad.

Maybe it even becomes more beautiful.

Maybe there'll be a little house.

Supported independent living.

With outpatient help when needed.

My own key.

My own coffee maker.

My own music corner.

Maybe there'll be a kitten sleeping on the windowsill while I make music.

Maybe my friends will visit.

My aunts too.

Maybe there'll be laughter about old stories and new plans.

Maybe freedom will return.

Step by step.

Not all at once.

But slowly.

Like spring after a long winter.

For the first time in a long time I'm not only looking back.

I'm also looking forward.

Not because I'm sure everything will be fine.

But because I've learned that difficult chapters don't automatically mean the end of the book.

My name is Angela.

My artist name is Snifto.

I am forty-three years old.

I make music.

I still dream.

And I'm still here.

That last part may sound small.

To me it's big.

Because as long as I'm still here, I can still love.

Still make music.

Still laugh.

Still make new memories.

Still write new chapters.

Maybe that's ultimately the meaning of hope.

Not knowing how the story ends.

But being curious enough to turn the next page anyway.

And so I don't close this book with goodbye.

Not with sorrow.

Not with regret.

I close it with a promise to myself.

That I'll keep writing.

Keep dreaming.

Keep building.

Keep hoping.

Because my story isn't over.

Maybe the most beautiful part is still to come.

And honestly I think my mother, my father, and Martin would have found that a beautiful thought.

The End.

Or perhaps better said:

To be continued.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments

You may write a book alone, but you never live a life alone.

That's why at the end of this story I want to pause with the people who, in whatever way, have been part of my journey.

First I want to thank my family.

The people who were there in good times and in difficult times.

The people I've lost and the people who still stand beside me.

You all have a place in my story and in my heart.

I also want to thank my aunts.

For their presence, their support, and the fact that family sometimes keeps existing, even when life gets complicated.

I also want to thank my old friends.

For the memories we made together.

For the moments of laughter, music, conversations, and everything that once seemed self-evident and therefore perhaps became so precious.

I also want to thank my new friends.

People I met later in my life.

People who got to know me at times when I wasn't at my strongest.

Thank you for your patience, your trust, and your presence.

A special word of thanks goes to everyone who helped me during the writing of this book.

To everyone who listened.

To everyone who encouraged me to keep writing.

To everyone who helped me give words to my memories.

Thank you.

Thanks to the counselors, caregivers, and therapists who stood beside me during difficult periods of my life.

Not everyone understands how much difference one listening ear, one conversation, or one small gesture can make.

I've learned that accepting help isn't weakness, but requires courage.

Finally I want to thank myself.

The little girl with the blue bicycle.

The young woman who walked through London.

The traveler in Rome.

The walker in Paris.

The woman who kept getting up after loss, grief, and difficult years.

And the woman who ultimately decided to write her story.

Because despite everything I stayed.

And as long as I keep existing, new chapters remain possible.

To everyone who has read this book:

Thank you for your time.

Thank you for your attention.

And thank you for wanting to experience a piece of my journey.

With love and gratitude,

Angela

Snifto