TOMI ASTIKAINEN

The Sunhitcher
ON THE ROAD WITHOUT MONEY
DEDICATED TO US.
IMPOSSIBLE TAKES A
LITTLE BIT LONGER.

THE SUNHITCHER
ON THE ROAD WITHOUT MONEY
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Recipe for a Travel Book

Ingredients

- 2 previous books (home-made)
- 3 useless diplomas
- 1 liter of olive oil (alternatively diesel)
- 250 liters of actual events
- A map of Europe (alternatively World Atlas)
- 5 critical facts about society
- 17 big fat lies
- 198 fake names
- 385 bottles of beer
- 29 bottles of hard liquor
- 1 pan
- 1 small pot
- 1 big pot
- 28 grams of pot
- 1-300 spoonfuls of fiction
- A pinch of plot
- 5-200,000 euros
- 1 thumb
- A Swiss knife
- 1-2 backpacks
- A towel
- 30 markers (fat-tip)
- 1 onion

Cooking instructions

- Preparation time: 28 years
- Cooking time: 18 months

Carefully separate notes from the coins. Pour away the coins. Take all the notes and use them to light the fire. Print out the 3 books you have prepared earlier and use them to keep up the fire. Heat up the olive oil (or diesel oil) in the pan. Add the diplomas and keep stirring until burned. Throw them away. Open the map of Europe and place the thumb on the map at random. Go there by carefully extending the thumb in an upwards position.

At this point it is still important to keep the thumb fresh, so don't cut it yet. Collect the actual events and keep adding them in the small pot. Use markers sparingly. Take the pot and add it to the pot while stirring regularly with the map of Europe (or World Atlas). Don't panic. Spoon away the uninteresting broth. Always bring a towel.

Open the beer bottles one by one. Don't let them breathe too long. Move the boiled events from small pot to big pot. Smoke some more pot. Add water to taste. Keep adding the fake names and big fat lies one by one. Stir them well with the facts. Spice up with fiction. If too mild, add hard liquor. Add the plot. Be careful not to make it too concise. Keep stirring.

The book is ready when most of the liquid is vaporized. Use the Swiss knife to cut off the thumb to prevent over-adding actual events. Serve for free, fresh from the backpack. Peeling the onion guarantees tears.
PART 1: SPRING

The answer is to educate people for functions more cerebral than fucking, smoking dope, watching TV, or the idiot jobs most are currently toiling at.

Robert Anton Wilson
Changing the Planet!

WHAT THE HELL? A TRUCK driver listening to Painkiller? Judas Priest was blasting from a red Scania truck idling at the Latvian-Lithuanian border. The driver’s name, Jakub, was in the windscreen.

“Are you coming or not?” a 40-year-old semi-obese Polish guy had a resounding American accent. He was about to start towards Lithuania, and probably beyond.

Truck drivers are hitchhikers’ best friends. They don’t give a shit even if you look like shit. I did. The zipper in my shorts was broken and my loose-buttoned blue collar shirt was covered in sweat. I usually had Do-It-Yourself earrings—a screw pierced through my left ear and an aluminium ring on the right. I took them off while hitching1, not to look so much like a terrorist.

They say that my blissful half-closed eyelids, sharp facial features and a wide grin on my face give an impression of a cross-breed between a Buddha, a falcon and a rattlesnake.

“Um, could you maybe turn it down a bit? Terrible hangover,” I explained in English and climbed in with my small rucksack, water bottle and hitchhiking sign. Fuck, if only I had a painkiller. Last night I had failed in hitching completely and ended up drinking excessive amounts of Riga Balsam and playing Mortal Kombat with some Latvian teenagers.

“Hi, Remmus Reverof,” I introduced myself.

“Reverof? From Russia?” Jakub asked.

“No, Finland,” I corrected. The name came from my great grandpa.

“Oh, Finland! Great country!” Jakub complimented and took a sip of his coffee.

Everyone kept saying the same about Finland, whether they had been there or not—most often not. According to a recent Newsweek study, it was the best country in the world. “Being born in Finland was like winning in lottery,” my parents’ generation used to say. I had never been able to put my finger on what they actually meant.

In Finland every newborn baby is entitled to a maternity package—diapers, clothes and that kind of stuff—worth of 274 Euro. This is recognized as proof of a well-functioning social system. But at the same time the babies inherit a share of the public debt—some 15 000 Euro, growing by the minute. They are expected to pay this money indirectly over the years in form of taxes, pensions and other side costs of work, once they have been squeezed through the world-acclaimed Finnish education system to become obedient worker gnomes.

“Well, it’s just a name for a geographical location, really,” I downplayed Jakub’s compliment.

“What, you don’t like Finland?”

“Of course I value some sides of it, like people’s honesty, clean nature and a certain degree of freedom,” I replied. In fact, Finland was a country where I could do whatever the hell I wanted; run butt naked into a lake filled with clean fresh water or get drunk and piss on the stairs of the parliament. This was the real land of the free and the home of the… well… Santa Claus, I guess.

“There’s also Nokia, Linux, and a gazillion computer programmers,” Jakub added.

“Um, yeah. True. How do you know that?” I was bemused.

“I used to be one. More of a hobby, really,” Jakub explained somewhat surprisingly.

Although I had never mastered the art of programming I was fascinated by their work, especially the

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1 Trampen, autostop, thumbing… it has many names, but the basic idea is to travel with people who have empty seats in their cars. Although some hitchhike mainly because it’s free, many are also motivated by other factors: less environmental baggage, sense of adventure, meeting amazing people, challenging yourself etc. People who are driven by fear couldn’t possibly be driven by strangers. They think hitchhiking is dangerous. It is. Many people die in traffic, but usually in their own car. Even more people die in their home. Hitchhiking is all about mutual trust. For more info: www.hitchwiki.org
open-source communities they were managing. I had heard somewhere that the age of human brain cells is about seven years. If the cells renewed, maybe it meant that the whole person changes, every seven years. Or maybe the brain cells were like any other computer program: developed over time and released in various builds and versions.

If that was the case, “me version 1.0” was the chubby happy child of 0-7 years. Physically it was bloated like Windows Vista and relying not only on the developers but the users as well.

Me 2.0, aged eight to fourteen, was full of bugs, kept on crashing, not very popular and partly abandoned by the developers.

Me 3.0—the 15-21 years young rebel without a cause—was unpredictable and unstable. It seemed to run some sort of an evolutionary algorithm: It didn’t obey commands but oftentimes did the exact opposite.

The fourth build of me—22 to 28 years of age—sucked in information at ever-growing speed. Its processor was constantly updated, over-clocked and overheated. It was perfect for intense social networking and accumulation of knowledge. It was a supercomputer which was capable of thinking it had super powers, but in the end its best feature was that it was able to correct its own bugs.

4.9.5 was already a quite stripped down, simple and agile version that would be soon followed by 5.0, which was still in the works: the code was drifting nowhere from the abyss of ones and zeros to the wide sea of question marks.

In fact, just recently I had faced a dead-end. I had thought of giving up, tired of fighting against windmills. I had questioned my reason to live. I even had thought about offing myself.

But then the scales had fallen from my eyes: If I was ready to take my own life today, I might as well do it tomorrow, and live today as if it was my last… and then apply that wisdom to every day, until I actually died of natural reasons—like choking on a goldfish or drowning in asparagus soup. I would not wait for the world to change but to be in the moment, truly connect with others, astonish people with good will and, with my own example, do my best to actively change people’s perceptions of what’s possible.

Coincidentally I had just heard about the Hitchhikers’ gathering in Portugal. This year it was called 6-8-10 and its slogan was “Yes—Oui—Ken”. Sixth of August 2010. In five weeks’ time? Five thousand kilometers, at least? Crazy idea! Two days later I had been thumbing up already. The world is my oyster, yet it kind off smells rotten… Let’s go and find out what else is on the menu.

I noticed that I had, once again, fell into my own thoughts. Jakub was clearly expecting me to break the silence. “So, programmer… that’s why you speak such good English?” I pried.

“Nah, I quit all the computer stuff ages ago. It kept me in front of the screen for 24/7. I started being physically so weak that I thought maybe there was another job where I could… well, walk for instance. I moved to Cleveland, Ohio, for seven years. Worked in a factory, practiced my English, hooked up with a Polish woman, knocked her up and moved back to Poland. That’s the result,” Jakub grinned and pointed a picture of a baby boy on the wall.

“Nice. How old is he?” I pretended to be interested.

“Fourteen months. You have any kids?” Jakub asked.

“Not that I know of,” I commented with a blink in my eye.

“Girl friend?” he kept shooting questions.

“Mmmyeah… Kind of…” I mumbled. I had tried to avoid this question.

For almost a year I had been without anyone by my side—something that happens when you retreat into solitude to gain some spiritual understanding, and to heal a bunch of annoying STDs that threaten to turn your dick into a cauliflower.

I had been so close to losing interest to women whatsoever and now they were barging into my life from all doors and windows. I had just spent my last weekend in Finland with a stunningly beautiful girl. She, a business student with high hopes of a well-paying job, understood I was not going to be an ideal father for her future kids because a) I refused to limit love to any one person, and b) I was exhilarated by my looming personal bankruptcy. Nevertheless, a nice girl.

Got laid.

Then, just before leaving, a girl contacted me who had been in the same uni with me. She wanted to meet me because she was also in the middle of spiritual awakening. Hell! Former model and a successful business woman… waking up?

Didn’t get laid. Didn’t even try… too much.

Most people are conditioned to monogamy—to think that they can have only one partner at a time. Polyamorous people, however, think that love should not be limited—that you can have more than one intimate relationship at a time, as long as it happens with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved. They define what it means for them, and stick to the common agreements. These relationships are usually built upon values of trust, loyalty, negotiation, and compersion, as well as rejection of jealousy, possessiveness, and restrictive cultural standards. Thus, it’s not cheating or polygamy. Read more: www.polyamorysociety.org and www.lovemore.com
I cursed the universe that it threw all these wonderful people on my path right now, when I had decided to leave.

And now there was V.

I had met the woman of my dreams at the backpackers’ camp in the most remote part of Lithuania. It was a huge beautiful green hill with a pond, a barbeque area, old wooden buildings, a proper sauna and a yurt—a traditional round hut cloaked with sheep hides. Viktoria, or V for short, arrived there in the morning when I was cooking buckwheat porridge for everyone.

What a beauty! I couldn’t help but noticing how enticing she looked. Fuckable.

In the afternoon V asked me to join her to take a dip in the lake. We walked across green meadows, into the lush forest and down to a small path that swiveled through a couple of tiny houses that were surrounded by herds of goats, berry bushes and vegetable gardens. V wore a beautiful bikini which complimented her stunning body. She is was out of my league, I thought. But somehow she liked my company.

In the evening I noticed myself serving V like Goddess, trying to please her any way I could. I sprayed V’s ankles with mosquito repellent. “You care for me?” V marveled and her deep blue eyes enchanted me immediately. Hell, I really do care about her… quite a bit, in fact.

We moved down to a bonfire and shared our thoughts about life, love and everything else. It was so easy to talk with her. V wouldn’t even judge my somewhat controversial and socially unacceptable opinions.

She suggested we’d go away from the fire so we could see the stars better. We laid down on the moist lawn under the star lit sky. This is it. Now or never. Kiss her!

“Let’s roll down the hill!” she got a wonderfully childish idea and escaped my grip before I could do anything. She went first and rolled on her side all the way down the lawn, giggling and spoiling her clothes with wet grass. I followed and probably squashed about a thousand small frogs on the way. I bumped into her. We both laughed. I dragged myself next to her and the chuckling stopped. We’d just watch each other in the eye.

“May I now kiss you?” I asked in a soft voice and our lips touched for the first time. It wasn’t a long or extremely passionate kiss but a careful tender seal of approval that put all doubts behind us.

I sighed. Damn, I missed her. Jakub noticed me wiping a tear off of my eye and changed the topic: “So, where are you headed?” I gathered myself.

“Portugal,” I forced a smile.


“Yes! Hitchhiking all the way. It’s the best means of travel,” I smirked.

“Well, I’ll take you to Berlin. But wouldn’t it be easier just to fly?” Jakub asked.

“Sure it would. But hitchhiking is a wonderful metaphor for life itself. Ordinary traveling is always about going from place A to place B. It has a pre-set process of waiting, paying, timetables and rules. Hitching, on the other hand, is more about the journey. Once you put your thumb up you don’t know exactly when and where you will be headed, but you can rest assured that it is an interesting journey,” I explained.

“What do you do for living?” he asked.

“I don’t,” I answered.

“Come again? So you just travel?” he was confused.

“I don’t want to have a job, but I guess you could consider it work if I write blogs and books, cook, do graphic design, coaching, planning, public speaking, arranging workshops… you name it. I just don’t ask for any financial compensation for it,” I told him briefly about my choices in life.

“But you must be loaded to travel so much?” he asked.

“No, I don’t use money. My budget is zero euros,” I answered without thinking.

Jakub must have thought I was mad.

Granted, 5000 km of hitchhiking sounded like a bit of a stretch, especially with no money at all and with no idea how to get back—if I was coming back at all. But I was in a point in my life that I had nothing left to lose. A year ago I had let go of my past life to make space for that Remmus 5.0 to be born.

“No money? How did you reach that decision?” Jakub got curious.

“I was a social entrepreneur, trying to fix the world through business. I felt the pain of the world on my shoulders: the gap between the rich and the poor kept widening and nature deteriorating. But it felt like I was just trying to glue back the fallen leaves when the tree is sick in its roots. It seemed that all social problems stemmed from the monetary system that we live in,” I explained.

“I think I know what you’re talking about,” Jakub said surprisingly.
“You do?”

“I might be stuck driving this goddamn’ truck but I’ve done my research. I had always thought that it’s the governments who create money but then I saw a documentary on—how do they call it—fractional reserve banking system. It explained that money creation is a task granted for private banks that don’t even lend out other people’s savings but create money as debt, out of thin air,” Jakub sounded appalled.

“And they expect it to be paid back with interest. Isn’t it a great business to be in? That amount of money, the interest component, is never created in the system. It doesn’t exist. Thus, there is always more debt than money. There’s never enough money to pay all the debts,” I added.

“That’s why we need continuous growth. That’s why there’s so much waste and poverty. Scarcity and problems are good for business. We don’t have incentive to do the right thing and solve societal and environmental issues for good! That’s why I have to drive these damn pig carcasses around,” he grunted.

“It’s actually no longer the pigs, the goods and services, the real economy, that matters. Financial markets need the growth of the real economy but right now 97% of daily transactions are just imaginary ones and zeros on the computer screens, future debt obligations in one form or another,” I replied.

“And these electronic markings make people lose their nerves, ruin their relationships and destroy the planet. Gosh, doesn’t it sound like some idiot race from some really bad B movie?” Jakub heated up.

“You see? Some say we have all these issues because people are greedy. But greed is not engrained to human DNA. The in-built feature of the system, that there’s never enough to go about, makes people act greedy and competitive. This realization caused me a personal moral dilemma: If every cent in my wallet was someone else’s debt, how could I ever have a clear conscience? I didn’t want others to become poor for me to live well. So, little by little, I started letting go of all ties to the monetary system. I got rid of most of my earthly belongings and let go of my flat, phone and other fixed costs. I became voluntarily homeless and started a nomadic lifestyle,” I shed light on my recent history.

“When was that?”

“A year ago.”

“You haven’t used any money in one year?” he asked.

“Well, I was accepting ‘donations’ from my parents to buy some cigarettes and alcohol. I guess that made me 97% moneyless. But now, before leaving for this trip, I realized there’s no turning back anymore, that I want to make it 100 per cent without money,” I explained.

“What made you change your mind?”

“I felt I really had to break free. Then, just at the right moment, I received an email from a bailiff. It said that my study loan is recovered by an enforcement order. I replied explaining what I had been doing for the past year and why, adding that I have hardly any earthly possessions left for them to seize. Surprisingly enough the bailiff turned out to be a good lad who understood the fucked up nature of our monetary system. However, he didn’t want me to make hasty choices and flush the rest of my life down the toilet. ‘If we don’t receive the money by the end of August, I will establish your bankruptcy,’ he told me when he realized he couldn’t convince me otherwise. ‘If you don’t want to be part of this monetary system then you must change the planet,’ he said. ‘Which planet? What does he want me to do; hitch a space shuttle?’ I thought. I had no chance but to misinterpret his words. I decided to do my utmost to change this planet.”

“You just refused to pay? I admire your courage,” Jakub said.

“Thanks. Most people don’t understand that the only way to stick it to the man is to refuse paying the debts. They say not paying your debts is immoral or at least irresponsible behavior. They blame me for being a parasite survives by ‘doing nothing’. But I know this is the right thing to do; not because it is somehow an ultimate solution but because it allows me to get into this kind of conversations,” I winked.

“Doing nothing? Nowadays people who have money, make more money, by doing nothing. The poor working class is financing the elite’s lavish life style by the sweat of their brow,” Jakub said.

“My sentiments exactly,” I agreed.

“Guys like you are doing their very best to change the system at its roots, so that no one would have to go through this shit again!” Jakub sounded now nearly emotional. He saw some sort of a hero in me.

On our way to Berlin Jakub treated me with food, cigarettes and even a shot of yummy Polish vodka. The winding road, darkening night and full belly made me drowsy. Images of last night’s video game frenzy mixed with our earlier conversation. I fell asleep dreaming of The Mortal Kombat Against Capitalism.

3 Nowadays a fractional reserve banking system is used nearly everywhere in the world. It means that the banks need to have only a fraction of the money that they lend out. This is based on government approved fiat money; money that has only a nominal value and is not tied to gold or any commodity. In essence, money is created into the system through bank loans and credit. Whenever new debt occurs, new money comes into existence. And because debt is issued with interest, there is always more debt in the system than there is money to cover it. That pushes us into competition at every level, makes us waste natural resources, forces people to create artificial scarcity of goods and services, and ensures that some people need to fail—or die—for others to succeed. For more info: www.thezeitgeistmovement.com
Fight to 20 points! On the left: Reverof. The Capitalist coming from the right. Looking mean in his suit, tie and top-hat, puffing a big Cuban.

Capitalist: “Free market is the best system.” Reverof doesn’t respond. Capitalist jumps behind him and adds: “…until now”. Three points to the Capitalist. Reverof reaches behind and grabs him by the collar. Fast moving Capitalist defends with an attack: “Communism never worked!” Two points. “Socialism doesn’t work!” Point.

“It worked until the 80s,” Reverof stings surprisingly. Two points.

Capitalist takes the punch. “We don’t live in the 80s anymore!” he responds with a grueling hit to Reverof’s groin. Point.

Reverof uses the force of the attack to defend and answers with a combo: “None of the elite-driven isms work anymore. They were created for industrial society.” Point. “We don’t live in an industrial society anymore…” Point. “…but in an open society!” Point.

(Reverof 5 / Capitalist 7)

Capitalist attacks again: “The period of capitalism has witnessed prosperity never seen before!” Two points.

“It’s because of advances in science, technology and cooperation!” Reverof answers and throws Capitalist to the ground. Two points. Reverof jumps up in the air and, before the stunned Capitalist has time to get up, kicks him in the head: “Taking advantage of oil brought the prosperity!” Point.

Roundhouse kick from Capitalist takes Reverof by surprise: “You’re a bum!”

Reverof avoids the kick: “Ad hominem! I’m not on the dole!” Point.

Second kick on his chest: “Freerider!” Point. Bemused Reverof doesn’t have time to block a punch on his chin: “You’re living off other people’s money!” Point.

Reverof refuses to degrade to the level of personal insults and takes distance. His mouth is like a flame-thrower: “Fucking hell! 37 000 kids die every day ’cos of hunger and curable illness. Problems create profit!” Point. “Production works. There’s enough for everyone to go about.”
Artificial scarcity of money creates shortage!” Capitalist maneuvers away from the fire but burns badly. Point.

(Reverof 11 / Capitalist 11)

Capitalist throws a dagger that hits Reverof in his chest: “Money delivers information and guides production!” Point.

Reverof removes the dagger and throws it back: “Demand can be calculated based on consumption. Even today stores have a lot of data about their customers.”

Capitalist returns uramawa kick: “Straw man! You didn't respond.” Point.

Reverof goes melee: “If you wish to ‘vote with the wallet’ let’s replace the debt-based fiat-money with more just ‘currency’ and distribute it as a monthly basic income to everyone equally.” New suggestion! Three points.

Capitalist breaks free and gasps: “Inflation!” No effect.

Reverof kicks him in the knee-cap: “In this system inflation is a monster for the savings of the rich. It alleviates the injustice created by interest!” Point.

Capitalist grabs Reverof’s hand and pulls him to the ground: “Even the working man suffers! Raises in salaries don’t follow inflation!” Dead end. Point for both.

“That comment was against the market system,” Reverof grins.

“Current system is not free market! Only real alternative is to break the government shackles and privatize everything! The market will direct to right...”

Fight is momentarily interrupted by an Invisible Hand that cuts through the screen. Reverof escapes the grip and pushes his fingers to Capitalist's nostrils: “False dilemma! There are other options! Let's automate basic production and fulfill basic needs. Let's open education opportunities for everyone.” Point.

Capitalist slaps him on the cheek: “Scarcity! Natural resources are limited!” Point. Close combat. Reverof: “It’s a distribution problem, not an issue of scarcity in production!” Point.

Reverof keeps slamming: “Two people don’t need two cars. Moving from ownership to sharing we’d both guarantee access to goods and save resources!” Point.

Capitalist struggles to stay alive: “Cannot work! Never tried in practice.”

Reverof takes Capitalist’s shiny new Smartphone and thrusts it in Capitalist’s throat: “That didn’t work ten years ago!” Point. K.O. Reverof wins!

(Reverof 20 / Capitalist 15)
Anarchists

IN BERLIN I SPENT SOME time in a nice community in Neukölln. I was hosted by a bunch of CouchSurfers who I hardly socialized with. They were all the time running somewhere and I felt somehow very antisocial. It was an insanely crowded place where people kept coming and going all the time. Adding to that my travel fatigue after staying in one truck for 1,300 kilometers, needless to say, I felt a bit disoriented.

What was also a bit confusing was the fact that everything in this house was shared. I happened to leave my tooth paste on a sink and next day it was nearly empty. Here people hardly used any money for food. I had done some dumpster-divings before but Berlin was a heaven for foraging free food from the trash. People brought stuff all the time to the already full fridge. But when I tried to find something in the bins there was either nothing or they were locked.

I was starting to doubt if completely moneless traveling would work out. I took distance to other people, went for a walk and was kind of lost in my thoughts. Would I always find something to eat, a place to sleep and water to drink? Then, I noticed a spray-painted text on the asphalt: “Love the universe and it will love you back.” Words of wisdom. I could use that as my new motto.

Encouraged by this message I volunteered on a mission to get some pastries and buns from a bakery on Prenzlauer Promenade. I rejoiced when I saw the famous Pankow bread dumpster. The huge green container made my eyes roll. I opened it with a heavy winch, climbed on top of it and jumped in. Odor of fresh-baked bread and pastries filled my nostrils and I couldn’t believe my eyes. There’s tons of it! Some of it still warm! A bad system is good for bums like me!

I placed a plastic bag on top of a huge pile of bread, sat on top of it and bit into a chocolate croissant. After five minutes and too many Berliners I felt like drugged with sugar and couldn’t eat anymore. I filled the bags, jumped out, closed the lid and cycled back.

4 Staying in hotels is both costly and often uninspiring. More than three million people have already signed up for CouchSurfing—today’s most popular hospitality exchange platform. CouchSurfers have personal profiles which you can explore on the site. You can contact locals and be hosted by them in their homes without a cost. You are introduced to the local culture and surroundings by the host. Afterward people write references of their hosts, guests and fellow travelers. This minimizes the perceived risk of going into a stranger’s home. After their first CouchSurfing experience people usually rid their unfounded fears and yearn for more. This trust between people is the basis of a solid CouchSurfing culture that is propped up by organizing common events, meetings and gatherings. For more info: www.couchsurfing.org

5 Half of the food produced globally ends up thrown away. Dumpster divers are people who collect food and other products from grocery store and market bins. Average Joe might think skipped food is dirty. Sure, you should wash it, even if it is single-packed in plastic. Most of the bread, fruits and vegetables are still edible after the expiration date. Dairy products, fish and meat are not usually in favor of the dumpster divers because the quality of food might be compromised. Locks, fences, trash compressors and underground bio waste containers make it challenging, but one always finds food that other people treat as waste. For more info: www.trashwiki.org
Others returned from the supermarket dumpsters. They had collected anything and everything from cheese to salami, vegetables, fruits, milk, roast beef, fish, salads, juices, chocolate, even toothbrushes for dogs. That night twelve people, and two dogs, feasted on a delicious antipasti dinner of 35 different dishes.

I was reminded of the dumpster-diver's dilemma. You kind of hope that you'd get free food but if you don't find anything you are just glad that nothing was thrown away. Here it was repulsively obvious: we live in an amazingly wasteful society.

Being among so many people pushed me to become more social and I realized I was in dire need for a hitchhiking buddy. I had preliminarily agreed on the Hitchgathering website that I'd travel together with a Scottish guy, Andy. He was on his way South from Amsterdam and didn't know where exactly the road might take him. Nor did I so we left the plan open.

I was in touch with some CouchSurfers in Germany who might be going to the Hitchgathering as well. I got a reply from a Vietnamese girl who was excited to join me although she couldn't go all the way to Portugal. We agreed to meet in Stuttgart and travel together to Lyon, France.

Although I was eager to go for the new adventures my thoughts kept drifting back to the woman who had moved into my heart. Oh V…

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We had been on the sauna porch watching the stars. She pressed her body close to mine and we started kissing more passionately. She rolled on top of me. She was so gorgeous. Her skin was soft, her hair like golden waves and her curves tempting. We necked and smooched until the locks of mosquitoes became unbearable. I escorted V to her tent like a gentleman and went to sleep.

In the morning I couldn't find her anywhere. I went to her tent at least three times, wandered around looking for her and finally gave up. I laid down on the lawn wondering if it had been just a one-night crush.

"Hi Remmus!" V surprised me. She laid down next to me and gave a peck on my lips, confirming that nothing had changed. She was still with me, at least for those couple of hours before she'd have to go back to Riga for work. We went for a swim and kissed long and beautifully in the middle of the meadows. When she had left I had no idea whether I'd meet her again—at least any time soon.

Next morning I woke up in Vilnius and there was a message from her in my inbox. It ended "By the way, Riga is really close to Vilnius."

I messaged her back instantly: “I’m really confused… My head says 'Go South' but my heart says 'Dude! What are you waiting for? Go after her!' But I guess I should follow my head, right?”

V replied: “I really want to say follow your heart, but… if I were you I would go South.” I asked her jokingly if she would host me. Of course she would.

Exactly 26 minutes later I made a rushed decision and responded: “I can’t fight this feeling. I’ll come to Riga. I’ll just pack my bags and get to the road. What’s your address?” I never stayed waiting for another reply. I just took her phone number—which I assumed to be correct—and headed to Riga. It was somewhat easy although sweaty hitch: three rides on a hellishly hot Via Baltica took me back to her.

"You’re crazy! You’re absolutely crazy!” V murmured and smiled when we hugged.

"But you like it that way,” I responded. I had not dared to come up with any expectations. Hell, I had not even known if I would be able to find her. But I did.

Now there was no doubt about it: V would rock my world, for the next couple of days at least.

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I was on my way to meet my travel buddy in Stuttgart. Her real name was Something Nguyen Something but in Europe she preferred to be called Sophia. She had been studying film making in Singapore and had just completed her exchange semester in Germany. Based only on a few messages I knew she'd be popping with joy once we got on the road.

I made my way out of Berlin and bumped into a Swedish hitchhiker, Ronja, on a gas station in Michendorf. She was touring squats[6] around Europe and she was also a first-time hitchhiker. She didn't have a sign, not even markers, and she was practically starving in the heat. Fucking hell, she needs to eat.

I went to the gas station restaurant to ask if they'd have any leftovers. “Do you speak English?” I asked from an elderly lady at the cash register. No reaction. “Entschuldigung! Ich reise… keine geld,” I tried in German.

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6 Squatters are people who move into empty buildings. Their motives vary from political demonstration to finding space for communal living. Many cultural and social centers have been initiated by squatters. Usually squatting is illegal but it doesn't undermine the fact that there are millions of square meters of empty space lying dormant while thousands of people go homeless. Squatters are not mere criminals but usually well-educated and highly aware individuals. They question the rationality of the current society and wish to make it a better place. For more info: www.squattheplanet.org
No way, this ain’t going to work. I noticed a young heavy metal dude and I asked him to write in German:
“Hi! My name is Remmus. I come from Finland. I travel without money. Would you have some food? I’d appreciate all help, except money. Thank you!”
I showed the piece of paper at the cash register. The lady was baffled. Then she smiled and started mumbling something in German to other people behind the counter.
“What are you doing?” Ronja popped next to me.
“I’m trying to get food,” I told her.
Soon the chef appeared with a humongous plate of sausage, mashed potatoes and brown sauce. That’s leftovers? “Dankeschön, dankeschön!” I thanked and took knives and forks, went to the table and motioned Ronja to eat.
“Thanks but I’m vegetarian,” she said. Of course. Am I supposed to eat that huge portion by myself? Momentarily the chef re-appeared with a gigantic plate of salad, dressing and baguette. Would that do the trick?
Her unpreparedness reminded me of the tips I had given for Sophia, another innocent young girl about to lose her hitchinity. I now hoped Ronja would have read this checklist as well:
Get a few good markers with fat tip and dark colors.
Make a re-usable sign: Staple, glue or tape two plastic covers on a foldable piece of cardboard and fill them with blank sheets of paper. This way you don’t have to worry about finding pieces of cardboard all the time.
Bright clothes make you visible to drivers. Dressing smart gives a good first impression.
It’s not always hitching. Sometimes it’s hiking. Wear good shoes! Two pairs make you invincible. Have some plaster available, just in case, and use it before the blisters become unbearable.
Make sure you have a couple of water bottles with you. Re-fill them whenever you can.
Travel light! Don’t take any excessive luggage. Better wash than carry.
Decide if you want to go far and travel long distances in trucks or if you’d rather take shorter rides in fast passenger cars.
Remember: it’s not about the destination, it’s about the journey.
Don’t get frustrated at any point but enjoy every second of it. There are no ordinary moments.
DON’T PANIC! Someone always picks you up, sooner or later. If not, you’re not meant to go that way right now. Everything happens for a reason.
If you have a travel partner agree beforehand if it’s okay to accept a ride that takes only one person. Splitting up and getting back together can be difficult.
Remember that your travel buddy is not a mind-reader. Be honest about your feelings—both positive and negative. Respect the fact that there are different personalities and varying needs.
Getting into and leaving cities is always the most challenging part. Check maps.hitchwiki.org!
Me and Ronja pretty much validated the last point by waiting for more than an hour. It was always nice to hitch with a first-timer. It brought back the memories of my own initial try-outs and the weird feeling that stems from the outside-the-norm behavior. What am I doing here? How should I hold my thumb? How about the arm? Does it matter? Why should I smile at strangers? I’m ashamed. What are they thinking about me? Is it really necessary to establish an eye contact? Is this ever going to work?
Eventually we got a perfect ride. It was a French guy called Coty and a dog named Shiva, riding a red Volkswagen van. Well, mainly it was Coty who was driving. He was going all the way to Clermont-Ferrand which was close to Lyon where we’d be heading the following day with Sophia. I could have ditched Sophia and just go all the way to France with Coty and Ronja but, biting my lip, I stuck to the plan.
Coty was a well-traveled guy who was now working in poultry industry research and development, hatching automation to be more precise. He had really interesting views on how food was to be produced in the future. He didn’t agree with the way things are nowadays and he was highly critical to capitalism.
We had such a good time lazing at the back of the van, smoking cigarettes and exchanging our anti-capitalistic views. It was refreshing to see that it wasn’t only young idealistic people who wished to see a radical change in the system we live in.
Ronja was an anarchist who opposed the system and wanted to end the modern day slavery we call careers. Funnily enough, her CV was quite impressive. Her job titles included Scooby-Doo, Bob the Builder, a Moomin troll, Sponge Bob, Postman Pat, Roary the Racing Car, Kung-Fu Panda, Pingu and Kowalski—the over-analyzing penguin from Madagascar. She had played these roles on shopping malls and various events, entertaining kids and earning a bit of pocket money—an image quite unlike the one painted by the media, where anarchists are always dressed up in black and throwing Molotov cocktails at the police officers.
I just recently I had had to face my prejudice for the anarchists also. I had just started reading a book called Anarchism, written in 1962 by George Woodcock. It was a thorough study into the history of libertarian ideas and movements. I had noticed I had had a misconception of anarchists as mere glue-sniffing air-heads who rebel against everything and destroy stuff, when in fact anarchy was much needed opposition to the concept of power and authority, and the most influential anarchists throughout times were well-educated writers and speakers ranging from Proudhon to Tolstoy.
They had seen and felt the injustice and oppression in society without necessarily being oppressed themselves. They had used the power of word to take a stand against the ruling elite, to point out the flaws in current society, to paint a picture of a better future society, and to show a path of how to get there. The book cited Peter Kropotkin: "...from all times there have been anarchists and statistis."

I didn't like to be limited by labels and categorizations but it got me thinking. Damn, am I an anarchist? My old mother had just recently expressed her worry for her son who went and threw away all those years of education. She would have been much happier if her son had had a well-paid job. But I refused to be a statist with a Master'sDegree. Earlier I had felt obliged to take care of my parents as they grew older. First I had wanted to make them rich, offer them great trips around the world, hire servants for them and make sure they can finally start enjoying life after all the hardships they've gone through. Then, little by little, I had started to understand it was never going to happen—that financial freedom for me didn't mean getting shit loads of money but, quite on the contrary, getting rid of money-related worries altogether.

Like any aware anarchist, I felt the pain and misery of the majority of people who were forced into antagonizing debt slavery. I was worried of the young generation who would inherit not only the striking amounts of illusionary debt but also a planet on the verge of destruction. And although I wouldn't impose violence on others, I was ready to die for a good cause. After all, I saw this vessel called Remmus Reverof as a disposable unit that would eventually perish anyways.

My thinking was very close to the anarcho-communistic thoughts that dated back one and half centuries. So many people before me had imagined a society where everyone would take what they need, without a cost, and give freely to others according to their capabilities. It was devastating to realize that although these ideas had been around for quite some time social exclusion and gap between the rich and the poor had just widened. But what was encouraging was the fact that finally today we had technology that made a society of free individuals possible.

The early anarchist thinkers had been on the right track but in the 19th century they could not possibly fathom that one day human labor might not be needed for survival, that machines would do the work for us. Today's nearly fully automated production and distribution of food was a good example of the abundance we could have if the majority of citizens would just cut the umbilical cord called money that kept them tied to the elite rule and prevented free access to life's necessities.

In the internet anarchy was already flourishing: people did whatever the hell they wanted, grouped together around issues of their interest and contributed long hours to common development projects, usually without any financial compensation. So, if creating a society of free individuals was no longer a technological hurdle what was blocking them of going forward? It was people's own thinking: inability to see life as it is.

Like Henry Miller put it, the change wouldn't be easy: "For the man in the paddock, whose duty it is to sweep up manure, the supreme terror is the possibility of a world without horses. To tell him that it is disgusting to spend one's life shoveling up hot turds is a piece of imbecility. A man can get to love shit if his livelihood depends on it, if his happiness is involved."

"I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. Oh boy, most of the jobs are just modern day slavery: people waste their lives in arbitrary nonsense that doesn't contribute anything to common good," Coty joined the conversation.

"Quite on the contrary; many jobs are actually just keeping the financial growth running, contributing indirectly to the imbalance between people and nature," Ronja added.

I quoted Robert Anton Wilson: "The answer is to educate people to actions more cerebral than fucking, smoking dope, watching TV and the idiot jobs most are currently toiling at."

"We could easily automate most of the boring and repetitive jobs and get people to educate themselves on areas that truly interest them," Coty spoke with an air of experience.

Coty dropped me on a bad spot, somewhere near Heilbronn. For situations like this I had an Ace in my sleeve: a sign that says "20". It was designed to get me out of bad spots. Using that I finally made it to a proper gas station. Now any ride would do. I stood at the exit and even tried hitching a police car. I smiled to the window opened, they gave my passport back, wished me good luck and drove away.

"Umm… are you guys going to Stuttgart?" I asked half-embarrassed.

"No. Show me your passport," was the reply. Shit! I had nothing on my conscience but I did not want any trouble. Should I ask to see his documents first? No, he would just baton my ass and pepper spray my face.

"Why do you want to see it? I'm from Finland. It's EU." I was a bit frustrated with them extending their so-called authority to an innocent hitchhiker but I was ready to comply. God damn it, this gas station ain't a fucking border crossing! Government fascist pig just trying to hunt for enemies of the state.

"Passport, please," said the guy driving shotgun.

Oh, he's polite. I had no choice but to give it to them.

"One moment, please." The window closed and I just stood there waiting. It took them a couple of minutes and I saw them speaking to the radio. Checking from Interpol if I am wanted or something.

The window opened, they gave my passport back, wished me good luck and drove away.
“Thank you? Well, you are welcome,” I hissed by myself. But you couldn't offer me a ride, could you? Wankers!
I finally got a ride from a Romanian truck driver called Alex. He told me he had not been home for seven months. He had been just driving from one airport to another, getting instructions on a small screen without ever seeing his boss in real life. He was absolutely pissed off at his work, at his boss and at his life.
Nonetheless, he could still joke about it and we had a pretty good time together. He shared the little food that he had and gave me very strong wine. He played some insane Romanian folk songs so loud my ear drums trembled. And he told me stories of hookers in different countries and truck stops.
I hoped he'd get his life in order and escape this idiot job he was currently toiling at.
The Happy-go-lucky

Sophia was blabbering incessantly all the way from downtown Stuttgart to her place. She told me how she had been met by a pickpocket a few days earlier and how she had lost her wallet, including all her cash, cards and documents. She was telling all this with a wide grin on her face and didn't seem to mind too much. She had borrowed some money from her friend for the trip but didn't want to use it now. She was impressed with my lifestyle and was eager to try moneyless traveling with me. Damn it! This is not some Reverof Ftee Tours travel agency. “Listen, you do your own thing,” I said. But she ignored it.

We had received a positive reply from CouchSurfers in Lyon so next day we headed for France. There would be a Hitchgathering pre-meeting happening in Lyon but Lyon was still far ahead. My plan was to skip it and head down to Montpellier and Barcelona to enjoy the Mediterranean atmosphere. Sophia… well, she didn't really have a plan.

As expected, she was full of piss and vinegar when she got on the road for the first time. Of course there was something inspiring in her youthful excitement but I reckoned that her non-stop chatter might piss me off at some point. The good side of her was that she kept getting us rides like nothing. I tried but she was quicker. We moved from one gas station to another with ease, although going through Switzerland wasn't necessarily the best idea.

Our most interesting driver that day was a middle-aged German fellow called Carl who had a fancy SUV and who was wearing expensive clothes. Verdict: a brainwashed asshole, living to work and motivated solely by money.

The first impression was so wrong. He had been a managing director in a company with 400 employees. He had had it all: a job that takes him around the world, a nice house, a family, a lot of expensive gadgets and whatever a worker gnome could wish for. Because of his job he had been away from home most of the time, however, and then, about six months ago, he had lost everything to his wife in the divorce process. His children had not talked to him for more than a year. Carl had hit the rock bottom and thought he'd never be able to survive.

Surprisingly, this downpour of disappointments had renewed him completely. Now Carl worked as a consultant, only as much as absolutely necessary. He felt that he was free, first time ever. He said the magic words: “Now I understand that the point in life is to serve others without expecting anything in return.”

Finally even Sophia was silent. I really would have loved to continue listening to Carl's wisdom but we had already reached Switzerland. It was late already. We had to admit we'd never make it to Lyon today. We got dropped off at the train station in Zurich instead. We needed a place to crash.

“Let’s find a WiFi and send some couch requests,” I suggested.

“You have a laptop?” Sophia was astonished.

“Remnants of the past life. Even a writer needs tools, right?” I said. We couldn't find wireless Internet at the train station so we ended up in a Mac Store. They didn't seem to mind us hanging out there.

I was blown away by the way Sophia approached the situation: she sent some forty couch requests to people whose profiles she didn't even bother to read. Agreed, I'd rather be hosted than sleep outside but that was way too much. I found it rude and selfish to spam so many people without really caring to respect who they are. But it worked. We got plenty of replies, picked one and soon we met our host, a Swedish guy called Henrik, near Lake Zurich where we were invited for a barbeque.

Henrik was like a character from a children's book. He had Italian leather shoes, white strides and light green collar shirt that he carried with pride. He had a notable mustache and a faint smile on his pleasant face. His
brimmed hat was tilting from side to side as he walked. “I have no problem living in a boring place because I surround myself with non-boring people. See!” he pointed at the crowd that had gathered for barbeque in the Chinese Garden by the lake.

Henrik offered us beers and we got some leftovers that other people were too stuffed to eat. I felt energy flowing into my body as I bit into that sausage. Yet again I was reminded how precious every meal on the road was. You never knew when was the next time you would get to eat.

I mingled with the people for a while and then headed for a swim. It was dark already and the lake was illuminated with lights all over. There were a couple of white swans going in circles in the crystal clear water. A lake boat that cruised past the shore added to the majestic view. It could have been from a dream, but no: it was real. As I dipped under the water I thought I wouldn’t mind if I never came up. I was living my dream, and thus it was another perfect moment to die. I was fulfilled by the beauty of life, knowing I had done all the right things. If I would die at that very moment I would have nothing to regret.

My lungs gasped for air as I surfaced. I took a few more strokes in the water, got off and stood still in the shore staring into the nothingness. No, I would not die yet. There were more adventures ahead, and more perfect moments to cherish.

Around eleven we left towards Henrik’s place. He took us through the old town. We would stop in front of the buildings and he would explain who had lived there and what they had done.

Henrik was like a walking Wikipedia: He told us details of artists, musicians and poets alike. He also explained about the architecture; how at certain time of the day the sun rays would pass through the cathedral windows in a certain angle and illuminate the whole interior. Damn, this would make a great story… if I was writing for Lonely Planet.

Then, at one street corner he asked: “Do you like wine?” We nodded and he said: “In that case, let’s take a bit of a detour.”

He led us to a small door that took us to a tiny alley called Place de Finlande. Finland Plaza? Interesting synchronicity. It was a way to an underground wine appreciation club that Henrik was a member of. He opened a tiny door and we descended the stairs into a chilled room with a long table in the middle, surrounded by individual wine cellars. We were the only people there. He opened his cellar door and asked what we’d like to have. We picked a 2003 Australian Merlot.

His most precious bottle was not wine but one of the strongest beers in the world: a 32% Tactical Nuclear Penguin. The etiquette said: “This is an extremely strong beer. It should be enjoyed in small servings and with an air of aristocratic nonchalance, in exactly the same manner that you would enjoy a fine whisky, a Frank Zappa album or a visit from a friendly ghost.” Of course this was Henrik's favorite bottle. It could have been a description of him.

We topped the excellent evening with a night cap at Henrik’s place that was situated nicely on top of the hill. “Damn, it’s so cool to travel like this; ordinary tourists could never get this kind of experiences,” I thanked Henrik for his hospitality.

Just before falling asleep I recalled our time in Riga with V.

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It had been a long hot day so when we got back to her place we took a shower, together. That was the beginning of a long sweaty night. We ended up enjoying each others’ bodies until the early hours.

In the morning I thought I was still dreaming: How could someone so beautiful be next to me? V was like an angel. Every glimpse of her made me more and more certain that she’s the closest thing to a heaven on earth.

I spent my days alone as V was working in an import company. Although her position included a lot of responsibility her salary was really bad and she felt like she is working only to fulfill the dreams of the shareholders.

“Leave your job and join me,” I suggested only semi-jokingly when she returned home tired. She appeared to be too responsible for that kind of sudden decision.

“Maybe one day,” V said with a blink in her eye.

The last night that we spent together before my departure we finally made love without egoistical worries and vain pressures. “Thank you!” she sighed just before falling asleep. If it wasn’t just sweat I’m sure I could spot a tear drop in the corner of her eye.

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Just a thought of that made me smile. I kept thinking that what if I’d scrap the whole Portugal-plan and just went back to her. It had been grueling to part ways.

Like ordered, I received an email from her where she told me that she wants to hitch to Switzerland. V promised that we could meet each other in Basel early September, in two months’ time. Damn, I am in
Switzerland! I felt like just staying and waiting for her.

In the morning we started seeing the first signs of Sophia's inexperience as a hitchhiker. She had terrible blisters on her feet because she had crappy shoes unsuitable for the hiking part of hitchhiking. I took a needle and burned it with a lighter to kill the bacteria. We got the water out of the blisters and patched them with plaster. I hope this won't slow us down too much.

We tried getting out of the city but somehow it seemed that people in Zurich were not familiar with the concept of hitchhiking at all. Sophia's excitement turned into continuous moaning. It was slightly annoying to say the least. Singaporeans should be smart enough to install mute-buttons in these things… Eventually we gave up and decided to stay for one more night. After all it was a charming city. Henrik was busy but finding a new host didn't seem like a big deal because in the evening there would be a CouchSurfing meeting coming up. Where? We exploited Starbucks WiFi to find out.

In the table next to us there was a casually dressed black guy who just sat there comfortably sipping his superlattemachiattofrappe. He soon interrupted our discussion: "So, you're that Finnish guy and she's the film student". We were perplexed. How did he know that?

He was an American called Johnny. It turned out that his host was one of those dozens of people who Sophia had contacted the day before. He was also in the film industry, as well as in teaching, IT and several other things. I liked the fact that he wasn't drawing his identity from one profession alone.

"I'm going to Finland for my friend's wedding," he said. Really? I acted out of a whim and gave him my return ferry ticket that I had got free from a friend who was working in the docks. I decided I wouldn't be going back to Finland any time soon. Johnny was happy to receive a free ferry cruise and I was happy to let go of all return plans.

We ended up staying with his host. Johnny seeded an idea: There was a huge CouchSurfing event happening in Paris this weekend. We had been completely unaware of it. Rock-Paper-Scissors decided that Lyon could wait and we would head for the Paris Rendez-Vous instead.

Next day we tried another spot and in less than 15 minutes we got a ride. Alright! We're on the roll again! Sophia kept picking us rides one gas station after another until we came to a huge service station near Basel where we got a bit stuck. I had been glad to give Sophia the responsibility of getting the rides because the drivers were quite sympathetic towards a small cute Asian girl in need of a lift. But this time Sophia was acting all weird. She went shopping for souvenirs and left me touring the huge parking lot alone.

Most of the cars were packed or going wrong way. Sophia's absence irritated me a bit but I didn't let it show. No one would give us a ride if I was frowning.

Sophia came back just to say she wants to spend all of her money before leaving the place. Great! I was itching to shake my head in disapproval but instead I came up with an idea: "Well, why don't you go and get us some food then." We had had no breakfast and I was starving. She went back inside and I continued my feeble efforts to catch a ride. No luck. After another half an hour Sophia returned.

"So, where's the food?" I asked.

"No food. I could only afford this," she showed me a Swiss sticker.

Oh bloody hell, Jesus, Mary and the rest of the lot! It was like she was purposefully trying to annoy me.
All that frustration was gone when Sophia got us the next ride. Well, she almost lost the guy while running to toilet for a few minutes. But that doesn't count. We were headed for Mulhouse, France.

Our driver missed his exit to Mulhouse and dropped us to a small road that pointed towards the city of Nancy. In a whim, we changed our plan: through Épinal to Nancy.

We were standing in a roundabout and it started drizzling. Sophia offered me some sugar she had pocketed at the restaurant. I took it gladly and gulped it down with water to restore my blood sugar level. I was long passed the feeling of hunger. I knew I needed energy but I didn't feel hungry. This started to be very common for me.

I knew that a human being can survive for at least ten days without food but only six days without water. I always had water in my peculiar travel bottle that I had brought with me from Finland. It had a handle and it was thus excellent for hitchhiking. People kept guessing what it contains: bleach, milk and gasoline were the most common guesses. I had to disappoint them saying it was just tap water.

We soon got a ride to Épinal from four Turkish-French construction workers who didn't speak a word of English. We concentrated on the breathtaking scenery. The road climbed the lush green hills that were surrounded by clouds. I rested my eyes in the sights and Sophia tried to take as many pictures as possible. We passed small villages with petite colorful houses. I was so happy that we were not on the dull highway anymore.

We started talking about spirituality and the forces in the universe. Suddenly the conversation somehow drifted to psychedelics. I asked Sophia if she had ever heard of Ayahuasca. She shook her head so I explained: “Ayahuasca is a mixture of a vine and some other plants that has been used especially in Southern America for shamanistic and medical purposes for thousands of years. The chemical in the blend is called DMT. It's the same chemical that gets released into your body in small amounts when you fall asleep, and completely when you die. Many plants have it, animals have it, and even we have it in our bodies. So you are basically a drug user already.”

Sophia's eyes glimmered as she wanted to hear more. “Dr. Richard Strassman has studied DMT scientifically and calls it 'the spirit molecule' because, as a rule, people who took it reported that they were in touch with higher beings,” I elucidated.

“I want to try it!” Sophia exclaimed. She was shining. “You do realize that your life will never be the same after that. You will see the universe in a completely new light. And it's not always a pleasant experience. I've seen videos where they show people in trance-like state, rolling on the floor and screaming hysterically, after taking Ayahuasca. One woman described it was the worst experience in her life, but she was forever grateful for it because it put her in touch with her deepest fears and hidden emotions,” I tried to clarify and made it very clear you have to have certain level of mental maturity to do something like that.

Sophia insisted she wants to try it with me before we part ways. Sigh.

We hadn't noticed the passing of time. The van had stopped and our driver was waiting us to leave the car. We had reached Épinal.

We were not far from Nancy but now Sophia had all kinds of ideas where we could go. She had fallen in love with hitchhiking. She was young, excited and scatter-brained. I tried my best to keep us somehow on the track that we'd reach Paris in time.

Walking away from Nancy city-center the next day Sophia's blisters started becoming a burden. I offered to carry her bag that wasn't too big but looked really heavy on a small girl's shoulders. It was another piece of equipment completely unsuited for hitchhiking.
“Just go ahead. I’ll catch up with you,” Sophia refused help.

Yeah, whatever. I walked briskly towards a gas station.

“Oops!” I heard Sophia saying behind me. She had accidentally dropped all of the carefully crafted signs. I saw her collecting the soaked papers one by one from a puddle of water. I cannot take this anymore!

I needed some time alone to count to ten—and then all the way up to ten thousand and thirty five. Although she didn’t do all this small annoying stuff intentionally it really started getting on my nerves.

At the gas station there was a tiny mini with Paris plates. There was place for one person. I asked the driver to take Sophia to Paris. We agreed to meet at Louvre—you know; the big-ass pyramid made of glass.

I had to zig-zag my way to Paris but I made it, eventually. The last driver offered me a metro ticket to the center.

I saw a bunch of Red Cross volunteers on the street. I just went asking for directions but they asked instead if I was hungry. I said I was and let them in on the details of my trip. Soon the whole bunch of them was surrounding me. I had two cups of coffee and a large bag of food. Now this is what I’d call a warm welcome!

They asked if I was going to sleep on the street. “I hope not,” was my reply. Then one of them asked if I had heard of CouchSurfing.

“Sure I have,” I replied with a smile and asked: “You haven’t, by any chance, seen approximately two hundred CouchSurfers around here?”

When I came to Louvre I was surprised and glad to see Sophia. She had been waiting there for hours… and lost her phone, of course. But she didn’t worry about it. She never worries about anything.

We headed for the park and found a huge group of some 150 CouchSurfers. The park was buzzing with joy. “What is that?” someone with a red CouchSurfing t-shirt pointed at my travel bottle.

“It’s water,” I replied with a smile and introduced myself.

“Hi, Antoine;” he said. His hippie pants, a collar shirt, a gray hat, round goggles and a transparent white umbrella created an impression that he had escaped from a circus in Goa or something. “What are you doing drinking water at this hour?” he was bemused.

“Well, we just arrived and I don’t have anything else to drink,” I explained.

“We’ll have to fix that. You see that crate of beer over there? Go ahead and take some,” he offered to share his drinks.

“Thank you!” I didn’t refuse the offer.

“Hey, Remmus! Who is hosting you?” he asked.

“No idea. We came quite ex tempore,” I explained.

“You can come to our place,” Antoine suggested and opened a bottle of wine. Wonderful! That was easy. Sophia was sitting down with some Asian guy, chatting and eating from the Red Cross bag. I brought her a beer as well and told that we have a place to sleep.

I went around and socialized. It was very confusing to see only new faces without knowing what to expect from this weekend. I still couldn’t believe all these people had gathered here just because they happened to be registered members on the same website. That’s really the only thing they all shared in common. Other than that it was a grand variety of nationalities, backgrounds and life situations.

But it was events like this—formed out of CouchSurfers’ own initiative—that created the CS culture and strengthened the sense of unity between people who’d otherwise be complete strangers to each other. I found it somehow superficial and pretentious, however. I wasn’t that interested in making new friends and getting to know how many siblings they had. In a few days I would be out of here like everyone else.

I might have been too short-sighted to understand that it wasn’t just about this long weekend in Paris; that, if I wanted I could meet many of these people on the road, stay in their homes and see their local realities through their eyes.

Our breakfast was baguette and cheese from the previous night’s picnic. Then we’d go for a unique type of sightseeing organized by the local CS members.

We formed teams for a street art scavenger hunt. Our team was called funky monkeys. For the next few hours we would tour the district of Belleville and try to spot certain graffiti and street art outlined in the instructions. The element of competition created excitement, the people in our team created the atmosphere and the art itself was a good enough excuse to spend the day strolling the streets that no ordinary tourist would take. I had to quit the game, however, because of a more tempting offer.

“Remmus, is it you?” someone took me by the sleeve.

“Ronja! For heaven’s sake, good to see you. What are you doing here?” I was astonished to see my Swedish anarchist-hitchhiker friend.

“I met this Martin and we came together to Paris,” Ronja introduced me to her Dutch friend.

“Hi! Ronja told me about a moneyless traveler. Respect, dude!” Martin gargled with his voice that was like mix of Lemmy Kilmister and Louis Armstrong.

“Would you like to sit down, Remmus? We have drinks,” Ronja pulled out a six pack of beer and a bottle
of wine.

“Sure. Wait a bit.” I noticed that Funky Monkeys stood waiting for me. “Hey monkeys! This will take me a couple of hours...” or days. Nice to get some time off from Sophia also.

“Alright, good times! Let’s sit here,” Martin said, sat on the asphalt and opened the wine bottle with his Swiss knife.

“Just a moment. I go ask if they have some food,” I pointed at a restaurant where waiters were collecting plates that were still half full.

Soon we sat down on the street to enjoy the wine. People from the nearby restaurant brought us leftovers—pork chops, fish, baguette, and a grand variety of cheese.

“Nice menu!” Martin was glad to see the abundance of food. The passers-by looked at our international group of scavengers with disgust although we tried to lighten up the atmosphere by offering them free cookies. “Fine, I do look like a pot head but I am a frigging IT professional, goddamn it!” Martin barked at the Parisian fancy pants.

“And I am a Master of Economics and Business Administration!” I added and winked to Martin.

“Really?” he was surprised.

“An IT professional, a Master of Economics and Scooby-Doo,” Ronja added.

We laughed and slapped high fives.

Martin was an interesting character. His work included bank applications and projects for the Department of Justice, yet he was an avid anarchist who was fighting for the rights of squatters, organizing ad-hoc Spiral Tribe parties for thousands of people and coding himself open-source software to enhance his artistic productivity as a video jockey. Although he had done all drugs imaginable from ketamine to MDMA and from LSD to Ayahuasca he was not your everyday pothead. In spite of this curiosity for drugs, or maybe partly because of it, he was very smart and had high moral standards.

Martin told me about the struggle of squatters in The Netherlands. They had long-lasting traditions of taking over abandoned buildings, refurbishing them and providing the local communities with meaningful projects to keep the kids out of the street. “The government sees squatters as the problem, whereas the real problem is that people, who can’t afford buying or renting their own flat, go homeless while there is massive amounts of empty space available.”

He was disgusted by the fact that the officials were in league with the media who did their utmost to give squatters a bad rep and how peaceful demonstrations turned to police-enforced violence. I knew that on American soil it had been customary for the cops to install a few Agent Provocateurs among the demonstrators to start the riots, but I did not know it happened also in Europe. “They are the ones with the mustache and the polished shoes,” Martin enlightened us.

I glanced at a guy who was leaning on a lightpost and smoking in chain a couple of meters away from us. He also had mustache and polished shoes.

“They pick out the weakest among us and push them to attack the police both verbally and physically. It seems that the demonstrators make the first move and that gives them justification to start beating the crap out of us. And somehow the media makes us look like a bunch of violent rebels, whereas most of the demonstrators are highly educated and intellectual people,” Martin croaked.

“Also the police officers are highly educated, I tried being objective.

“No, in Holland they’ve started recruiting stupid dim-wits and making it easier to become a cop. So, there are two kinds of cops: the smart ones work as detectives and the stupid ones wear the riot gear. And the educated lot does not like the stupid ones. You’ve seen what happens when you take idiots with small brain and big egos, arm them and give them a permission to use the weapons,” Martin referred to the insane acts of violence that had become more and more customary since the battle of Seattle in 1999.

“It’s the same shit in France as well. Don’t know how this turns out,” the guy with mustache said, lipped his badge, gave an encouraging wink and walked away. We were utterly labbergasted for a while and then busted in wild laughter.

I spent the whole evening with Ronja and Martin. We ended up on a private hard core punk gig where they had immense amounts of free home made booze. When they closed in early hours Ronja and Martin had disappeared to the roads less traveled.

Miraculously I managed to hitch a night bus in somewhat right direction and after a few kilometers of drunken strolling about I made it to Antoine’s flat.

I slept until the afternoon. It was time for another cheese and wine picnic. I didn’t really feel like socializing with random CouchSurfers right now. People were just sitting in circles and talking, mostly in French. Something was needed to pep things up. And that something was an aroma I could always spot from hundreds of meters away. My nostrils picked up the scent of marijuana in the air and like a trained dog I oriented towards its origin.

There was a French Algerian guy, Whazeez-Naym or something, who had just returned from holidays in The Netherlands with a big ass splif he was puffing along all by himself. It was his first time in a CouchSurfing
meeting and he seemed to be a bit left out of the oh-so-important conversations that mainly aimed at worthy goals like deciphering the name of someone’s pet squirrel or the winner of Big Brother. Afterwards people would leave a positive reference in the CS profile of their four-minute acquaintance: “a very sympathetic and open-minded person who likes to travel”. Blah!

Needless to say Whazeez-Naym didn’t mind being left out. That made two of us. I tagged along with him and he was more than happy to share his joint. I marveled at the size of it and I was hypnotized by its sweet aroma.

I carefully placed it between my fingers, made an air tight cup with my hands and lips and took a long drag. “Daaaaamn, this is good stuff,” I uttered still inhaling.

I could immediately feel the sweet Mary Jane kicking in and we kept on passing the spliff. Antoine came along and Whazeez-Naym passed him the joint. We all took a few puffs and enjoyed the moment in complete stillness.

Time stopped.

Everything was OK. The hundred odd people—no pun intended—were just a backdrop to here and now.

“Do you have water?” Antoine asked.

“Water… yes, water…” I handed him my travel bottle and he gulped down the last drops in it. My dry tongue was traveling on my palate that felt like sandpaper and I realized I needed water too. I stood up, thanked the guys and said I would go and try to find some more water.

I took about fifteen steps closer to the people who I thought I recognized the best. Yes, that’s where I had left about… ten dozen mours ago. “Moursh” seemed like a completely sensible measure of time at this point.

It took me about two moursh fifteen becons to balance my way to an empty spot where my rucksack and the water was. I hoped I had not injured anyone on the way. “Remmus, you are back!” someone said next to me. I couldn’t recognize who it was. Maybe it would have helped if I had opened my eyes but right now it didn’t feel like a feasible option.

Then I felt a new kind of rush kicking in. When I looked at the people next to me I realized they are shouting. What the hell? Less volume, please!

Soon I understood they are not really shouting but it’s just my audio-visual capabilities that had sharpened up… too much. I could hear everyone around me and even the people fifty meters away: “Chez-vous-chez coo-coo-lait,” “This lollipop is so tasty,” “Qu’est-ce-que cest la-loui-la”… What the hell is going on?

The sounds kept pouring in. It was like shooting rapids without a boat, passing waterfalls, diving under water and surfacing again, gasping for air, just to dodge a few rocks on the way, and feeling the roaring power of splashing water at every instant… but only this time it wasn’t water. It was sounds and voices:

“I want to be an architect,” “Should I take the last metro or stick with her?”, “Je voudrais un trampoline,” “What did I do wrong with her?”, “Don’t spill the wine, asshole,” “I wonder if I could I borrow that sweater,” “Black limousine with lots of chromed parts,” “What is the square root of 69?”, “Next month I have so many things to do,” “Membranes are really fascinating,” “I need that goddamn’ scholarship,” “Is that Sagittarius?”…

I wasn’t quite sure if all that was something I heard or if I was able to hear people’s thoughts. It was a scary but thrilling idea. What if our five senses aren’t really as limited as we think? What if we have all these capabilities but we just need to concentrate on them? Would I really want to hear people’s thoughts all the time? If I practiced this more would I be able to make more sense of it or would this cacophony just drive me crazy?

“Remmus, blah blah, blah blah blah?” Sophia asked suddenly.

I looked at her and felt a bit embarrassed that I was so out of this world. “I’m sorry. I’m really stoned. I had some real good ganja. I have no idea what you’re saying,” I blabbered.

“What do you mean?” she asked with an odd look on her face.

“I’m stoned. I smoked weed.” Doesn’t she hear me?

“I don’t understand,” she was still confused.

“Maa-riii-juuu-aaa-aaa. I smoked marijuana,” I tried to articulate. I must be so fucked up that she cannot understand what I’m saying.

Sophia wandered about somewhere. In about half an hour Antoine came. “Hey, the bus is leaving soon,” he noted. It was time to get back to his place.

“Where’s Sophia?” I asked. Antoine didn’t know. We looked for her for a couple of hours. She was nowhere to be found. Finally we ended up back to Antoine’s flat. Isn’t the fucking happy-go-lucky sitting on the stairs!

“It never occurred to you to inform us that you’re leaving, I said and went to bed.

We had a short feedback discussion; I told Sophia everything that annoyed me in her in a very constructive manner. I said that her happy-go-lucky mentality was mostly enjoyable but the flip side was that she acted very randomly out of a whim, kept changing the plan all the time and losing her stuff. I used our hitchhiking on the service station in Basel as an example of this behavior; how it made me feel when she just disappeared and went shopping.

“I did it on purpose to see if you could get a ride without my help,” Sophia said with bright eyes. Fucking hell! She could have told me about it.

“Yesterday’s disappearance kind of sucked,” Antoine commented. Sophia had nothing to say to that.
“I don’t have a heart to blame anyone for that. I was so out,” I laughed it off.
“Why?” Sophia asked.
“Because I smoked marijuana. Didn’t I tell you?”
“Yes, but what is it?” Sophia was baffled. I finally understood that Sophia had been living in such a cotton-padded environment that she didn’t know what marijuana is! Gosh we are just too different.
“Um, what if I continue traveling alone? Would you mind?” I asked her.
“Not at all. I think I’ll go and meet my relatives who live in Paris,” the happy-go-lucky stated.
“Do they know that you are coming?”
“No, but I guess I can just pop by,” she pondered. She had lost her phone and couldn’t contact them. And she wasn’t exactly sure what their address was. But she insisted that she goes. I started having second thoughts. Is it wise to let this girl go alone anywhere? She is so happy-go-lucky that maybe after losing her phone and wallet she might actually manage to lose herself.
Regardless, Sophia left.
Money Cannot Be Eaten

Getting out of Paris was harder than expected but finally, after five hours or so, I got a free ride in a taxi cab. I got stranded somewhere between Le Fuckall and Wer-de-Hellami.

Eventually I continued with a folk music band called Multiculti. I almost joined the band to perform a couple of Finnish classics “Säkkijärven Polkka” and “Lentävä Kalakukko”—or “The Polka of Säkkijärvi” and “The Flying Fish Cock”.

I stayed overnight in a cozy city called Tours. It had a feeling of a small town, with comely flowerbeds, clean streets, exquisite architecture and a few refreshing lawns and fountains here and there. I would have liked to be there even longer but I had decided that I could take part in the Hitchgathering pre-meeting in Lyon. The event took place in a nomad base called Casa Bonita—a house of two hitchhikers that had opened their doors for other travelers.

I finally tried to get into the same city with Andy who had contacted me through Hitchgathering website. Because we had both been in search of a travel companion we had agreed to hitch together. We started to realize it really was a search. It was damn hard for two hitchhikers to bump into each other while zigzagging across Europe. Now he was coming to Lyon… maybe.

I got my first ride in a police car. They saved me from the highway and the next thing I knew, I was sitting next to a very pleasant French woman called Marie who would drive me to Clermont-Ferrand.

“Promise you won’t kill or rape me,” she asked with a serious face.

“No raping. No killing. I promise.” I answered amused.

“I trust you.” she said.

Marie turned out to be my soul mate and her thinking resonated with mine. She said she had just resigned from her job at a company that exports aspartame. She had been chosen among the other applicants due to her honesty. In the job interview she had told her future boss how she would never personally use a neurotoxin like aspartame. The reply had been: “Just don’t tell that to the clients.”

The discussion drifted to my moneyless lifestyle.

“But how do you eat if you don’t use money?” Marie asked.

“I don’t eat money. I tried but even with a pinch of salt I didn’t like the taste of it.” I replied sarcastically.

Marie laughed. “Only when we have cut down the last tree in the forest we realize that money cannot be eaten,” she quoted the old Native Americans’ proverb and continued: “But aren’t you worried where your next meal comes from?”

“Ok. There are three ways for me to get free food. The first is simple. I trust the universe. The people that I meet on the road are by and large very generous and giving, sometimes to the extent that I have to convince them that I am not hungry. I’m thankful for every meal, even if someone else’s money was used to purchase it. People don’t expect anything in return. They help because I need help. And, of course, I then pay it forward and help others in my own way,” I explained.

“And what are the other two ways? Charity?” Marie asked.

“Sometimes I go to these community kitchens but usually I just ask for leftovers from restaurants. I’ve noticed that the fancier the restaurant, the more willing they are to give. Especially the ones with a lunch menu tend to have leftovers. Fast food chains usually have stupid policies that prevent giving anything but sometimes they can give out something at the end of their night shift just before the closing time. Sometimes I use a piece of paper in the local language to tell my story,” I told.

“I would be ashamed to ask,” Marie pondered.

“I hold my head up high and smile. If I’d appear as a beggar who desperately needs help it probably wouldn’t work. It’s important not to expect to get anything. If they say ’no’, I just accept it and thank them for their time,” I added.

“I understand. It’s just that my parents always told me to survive on my own,” Marie demanded clarification.

“Have you heard of Kabbalah and the willingness to give and receive?” I asked.

“Kabbalah, yes… No, tell me.”

“Kabbalah is the mystical school of thought in Judaism that aims to define the nature of the universe and the human being, the nature and purpose of existence, and methods for spiritual realization. One of these methods is the concept of ‘will to receive and will to bestow’. The lowest modality of existence is ‘receiving for the sake of receiving’, so typical for our ego-centric time where greed and crime get to flourish when everyone tries to collect as much possessions as possible.” I asked if Marie still follows. She nodded.

“I’ve noticed,” Marie said, nodding and tightening her grip of the steering wheel.

“The second step is ‘giving for the sake of receiving’, typical for example to people who enjoy doing voluntary
work: they get personal satisfaction from helping others. Maybe it applies also to people who pick up hitchhikers as well.” I joked and Marie smiled.

“So-called pure giving or altruism is ‘giving for the sake of giving.’ You help others without expecting anything in return. That’s the third step. And then, there’s the highest modality of existence, ‘receiving for the sake of giving.’ You accept gifts in order to please the giver,” I explained.

“OK. I guess we are still far away from that?” Marie asked.

“This is the stage we need to reach if we wish to unlock our unlimited creativity and enable full societal participation of everyone. But this last stage of spiritual development is the toughest one. We are so conditioned to feel guilty or uneasy to receive anything from others. There is no free lunch, right?” I smiled.

“Ok, I get it. And the third tactic? You said there are three ways you get food.”

“I go dumpster-diving!” I hollered.

“You mean you eat from trash?” she looked suspicious.

“Come on! Half of the food produced globally ends up thrown away. Of course most of this happens already in production phase but there’s plenty to go about even at the end of the supply chain. I don’t dumpster dive for meat or dairy products, usually just bread, vegetables and fruits. And I don’t check households’ bins but the ones next to grocery stores,” I explained.

“I wouldn’t eat from the bin,” Marie was still in doubt.

“They throw away perfectly edible, and sometimes single-packed food. It’s not dirty, but it’s better still to rinse it before use;” I told.

“So you still need a kitchen?” Marie asked.

“Dumpster-diving is at its best when it’s possible to feed a large group of people. I do it if I stay in some community, squat or a nomad base. I love to make people happy with free food!”

“Okay, it might work for one person, but don’t you think that if everyone acted like you the system would collapse?” Marie asked.

“Yes. People would not have enough to eat. I am not an expert in agricultural automation systems, harvester design or shoveling cow dung so I am completely useless for the rest of the population when it comes to food production. But if 95% of the people were this kind of free riders we would be just fine and dandy. In a way we all are free-riding in the system. Only about 2% of the jobs are anymore in agriculture. That’s how well-automated our food production is.”

“You said half ends up thrown away?” Marie asked.

“Yeah, we produce food for approximately 10 billion people but about 2 billion of us can’t afford it,” I replied. Suddenly Marie pulled off at the gas station. She wanted to offer me a meal.

“No, no. This is not why I was telling you…” I tried to refuse but she cut me off.

“Consider this your lucky day. Take whatever you want.” she demanded.

Gratefully I ordered paella and a green salad. If only people would see how much it means for her to offer me this meal… Maybe they would not write me off as a mere free-riding bum who lives off of other people’s hard-earned money.

As I sat down to eat Marie said she would go for a short walk to rest her legs after a long ride. She told me not to worry; that she wouldn’t drive off with my bags and leave me stranded.

“I trust you,” I replied with a wide smirk on my face.

After the time with Marie I continued in a hippie van, listening to reggae, petting a dog and smoking a joint. The scenery was postcard-like: tiny villages silhouetting the mountaintops, colored gently with the graceful blend of forest green and rock gray.

At midnight we reached the beautifully illuminated riverbanks of the Rhône and the Saône cutting through the city of Lyon, creating a sense of tranquility. Surprisingly, in Lyon everyone spoke perfect English. They seemed to enjoy even the most meaningless conversations with foreigners. This gave me good vibes.

I was astounded when I turned away from the city hall and just around the corner witnessed a very multi-ethnic punk neighborhood. Casa Bonita—the nomad base where I was headed—was just a couple of streets uphill.

I rang the buzzer and female voice responded. “Oh-la-la, baguette!” I whispered. It was a secret password that I had spotted from the Hitchgathering website.

The apartment was on fifth floor. No elevator. I reached the place panting heavily.

A Brazilian girl welcomed me at the door. She had also just arrived and there was no one to explain to me what the place really was.

Nonetheless, I felt welcome from the get go.

In half an hour the permanent residents, a French guy Thierry and a Mexican girl Lucia, arrived. When they had settled down I asked them what the story of the place was.

“It’s all there,” Thierry pointed nonchalantly at a printed leaflet. Did he just refuse to answer a question
because it was too simple? I knew there was something positively peculiar about this guy.

The leaflet was labeled “The Book of Boring Questions”. It stated: “These pages aim to answer all those questions that we keep answering over and over again. This way we limit our conversation to more interesting topics than these recurring practicalities.”

After some frequently asked questions was my favorite part: “Don’t consider yourself a guest. Here you’re a host. Your right to use the shower is as high as anyone else’s in the house. And the dinner is yours as much as anyone else’s. Everything in the fridge is yours. Everything you put in is mine, or hers, his, everybody’s.”
PART 2: SUMMER

Our spiritual moments are those moments when we feel most intensely alive.

Fritjof Capra
The Horny Prude and the Trotskyist

Casa Bonita soon had a new chef called Remmus. There were a lot of dumpster-dived vegetables, fruits and spices in the kitchen. I made two versions of veggie chili: a mild one and one so spicy that would make Indians shit in tears.

Once the food was ready I felt like I deserved a cigarette. I went down to the road to bum a fag.

Upon returning there were two newcomers from Poland sitting on the sofa: Amelia and Natasha. Amelia got up to greet me and gave me a big smile. She looked more Dutch than Polish: tall girl with cute face and curly bronze hair.

"Mjam-mjam-mjam!" Amelia enjoyed the food. Natasha was also cute, just smaller and her style was closer to punk. She shoveled in the chili, gasping for air, eyes watering and gulping down water. She looked like a sweating tomato. I guess she went for the spicy version.

After the dinner our seven-strong entourage let for an open-air movie which was due to start in just half an hour or less. Our host, Thierry, hurried us because he didn't want to miss the beginning. Granted, "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" is a classic but I would have rather just walked around the city without hastening too much. Nonetheless, I decided to follow, see the beginning and then leave.

When we reached the square the movie had started already and all the seats were taken. It was a nice setting for a movie though: an intersection of a couple of small alleys surrounded by tall Gothic walls and a big tree in the middle. I lay down on the asphalt and rested my head on someone's rucksack. Amelia sat in front of me. She was struggling to find a comfortable position. I tapped my belly and she got the hint. She rested her head on my stomach.

It felt good to have Amelia there. I had no idea who this stranger was but suddenly she was very close to me. After some time I couldn't resist stroking her lovely curly hair. I felt shy and tried to find excuses to take her hand. It started innocently, as if our hands would've met just by an accident. I played with her hair softly. Then little by little we both gathered more courage and finally ended up holding hands. When the movie approached its end I didn't want to leave.

As we walked back to the Casa I thought there would be nothing more between Amelia and me. I fooled around with other guys; we'd climb a scaffolding, jumped around like kids, grabbed a half-finished wine bottle from the street and drank it.

Once people started settling to go to sleep I took my laptop and checked a few things on the internet; it just happened to be right next to Amelia. I was prepared to move if Natasha would like to sleep there, but she seemed to be quite satisfied in her sleeping bag.

As soon as the lights went out I took Amelia's hand, she came close to me and we kissed. Her full lips were soft like satin. We caressed each other for a while and it was really turning me on.

Suddenly she stopped, took out her cell phone and wrote a message: "I have an idea. Let's go out." It was quite late already but I loved the idea. We dressed up quickly and tried to leave as silently as possible without waking up others. As soon as we got out into the staircase she kissed me passionately.

We ran down the stairs into the narrow dimly-lit alleyways and, holding hands, we climbed up the hill. It was an artistic punk neighborhood. The streets were quiet at night. Amelia was naturally beautiful and didn't require any make-up.

"So, who are you?" I asked when we reached the top of the staircase.

We burst in laughter when we realized we really did not know anything about each other. We hadn't had a chance to talk before, at all. But now we had all the time in the world to stroll around, to kiss, to embrace and to get to know each other a bit better.

I told my story: how I had left everything behind to see life as it is. "That's a brave decision! I've been thinking that there is something wrong in this consumerian religion. You are one of a kind. How old are
you?” Amelia asked.

“28,” I replied.

She smiled and asked me to guess how old she was.

“25 maybe?”

“Not even close. Nineteen.”

Hell no! Remmus! Barely legal! I hesitated for a while but then I realized the age difference didn’t really matter. She seemed to be mentally more mature than many others at my age. She told me that she was playing volleyball semi-professionally and studying physiotherapy.

Oh yeah, maybe I should mention not to surprise her later…

“Umm… Do you know what’s polyamory?” I asked.

“No, tell me.”

“Love shared openly and honestly. It’s like the opposite of monogamy,” I explained.

“98 percent of animals are like that,” Amelia answered bluntly.

“Say what?” I was surprised.

“I saw some documentary that talked about it.”

“Well, I guess I’m one of those animals. I want to be honest, share my feelings openly and live without secrets,” I told and thought that this might shake her.

“Nice,” she said and kissed me again.

“Come!” Amelia motioned me to follow her to a spot that had a great view over the city. We climbed on the wall, held each other tight and smooched. “Love Me Tender” by Elvis drifted to us from an open window nearby. It was like a scene from a cheesy romantic comedy.

We held each other close watching over the breathtaking view of Lyon. She was making me really horny. I opened her bra with ease, using just one hand.

“How did you?” Amelia was astonished.

“Years of practice,” I winked and my hand traveled on her breasts.

“I’m tired. Shall we go back?” Amelia asked so suddenly that even Elvis was taken aback.

Fuuuck! What an anticlimax! I had a stupid smile on my face and didn’t know what to say.

“Let’s go back to sleep,” Amelia repeated.

Mwahahaha! You thought you’d get laid!

When we got back to the Casa she closed her eyes and dozed off in my arms. It felt heavenly to have her there, as if she was someone who I had known for ages… maybe even before I was born. How is that possible? I was confused by my own thoughts, and fell asleep.

Fucking hell I miss her so much! Next day Amelia had left for the city for just a few hours and I was already missing a girl that I had just met. As if I had been waiting for her for my whole life. Go after her!

I was looking for her all over the city but there was no trait of her natural curls. What do I want out of her? Do we really have some deeper connection or am I just craving for proximity? I was bouncing around for more than an hour—through the old town and up to the hill where there was old ruins and…

“Andrew! Is it you?” I exclaimed in surprise when I bumped into the Scottish guy who I had meant to meet so many times before.

“Remmus-fucking-Reverof! Nice to meet you finally! You’re as ugly as in Facebook.” Andy came to hug me.

Eww! This guy is disgustingl sweaty.

Hanging out with Andy got my thoughts off of Amelia. He was a hard core Trotskyist. Although I missed half of his rant due to his thick Scottish accent, I could identify with some of his socialist thoughts. But I couldn’t help but disagreeing with his so-called solutions of having one big workers’ party and moving property and business ownership to the hands of the workers. Passing property ownership from one instance to another hardly challenges the broken system. It’s like noticing that the car is broken and then reacting by only changing the driver.

I also challenged Andrew’s belief that societal change could happen through party politics, noting that democracy is mere illusion, that The Powers That Be practically own the political parties, and that these parties dictate what their politicians decide on behalf of the voters. But it seemed I was unable to convince him that what is needed is a drastic re-design of the economic system, not just mere redistribution of political or economic power.

An early anarchistic thinker Jean-Pierre Proudhon who had spent a great deal of time in this very city had pointed out already in the 19th century that political democracy without economic changes could easily lead to retrogression rather than progress.

Nevertheless, in spite of slightly differing opinions Andrew and I became friends who clearly appreciated each other, because in the most important matter we agreed: capitalism has to go!

Coincidentally, as we returned to the Casa, Natasha, Amelia and a bunch of other hitchhikers were having
a conversation about the pros and cons of today's consumer society. They did not seem to have the right words to express themselves and could not get to the bottom of the problem. I couldn't resist cutting into the conversation.

"Because of the very design of the fractional reserve banking system, there is no other way but to consume more and more in order to avoid economic collapse," I interrupted. Didn't get it? They all look like question marks. I explained the whole thing quickly.

"I know that the system is flawed, but what can we do about it?" Natasha finally asked.

"Well, we could let go of property ownership, share all resources openly and use them for societal development without having the financial limitations on the way," I answered.

"But aren't people so used to lavish lifestyle that they don't want to give up everything now and revert back to staying naked in the caves?" Andrew questioned.

"We don't have to give up everything. People don't need cars that are nothing but heavy pieces of metal that most of the time idle in the parking lot. They need access to transportation. If we practice sharing instead of owning, educate ourselves in areas that are our true interests, use that education for societal development, and put our technology in good use, we can ensure high living standards for everyone," I elaborated.

"That sounds like idealistic communism. It didn't work in Poland," Amelia shrugged.

"Well, these ideas are very close to good old anarcho-communism, with an added flavor of systems thinking, science and technology. In fact this is the first time in history of humankind that we have the technological capabilities to make the age-old ideas a reality; to free people from wage slavery. We don't need a yet another ism but people pulling together to create a more sustainable system," I tried to shed light on the issue.

It turned to a fruitful conversation of how people would use their time so differently than nowadays when the basic necessities of life would be ensured for everyone. "Instead of just merely trying to survive people could live for spiritual, intellectual, physical and societal development," I summed up.

"But what would they talk about if they could no longer worry about money and complain about their jobs?" Thierry asked with a blink in his eye.

"Well, maybe they would be talking about their latest inventions, handicrafts or pieces of art they've created. Or even volleyball," Natasha answered and poked Amelia.

"Wow! I want to live in that kind of society," Amelia cheered.

"But still… How could you fight against people's desire to own, their jealousy or even hatred?" Thierry continued playing devil's advocate.

"We are not born jealous. It's all learned," Amelia said.

"Yeah, there was some study of a group of chimpanzees that lost their brutally violent and pillaging alpha-males to a disease. In just one generation they switched their behavior to a very empathetic, peaceful and loving community. If chimps can do it, maybe we can change our behavior also, don't you think?" I asked.

"Good example!" Andrew exclaimed and continued: "But people are mostly an uneducated mass who are kept in the dark. They don't stand up for a free world before they understand they are enslaved, before shit really hits the fan."

"Yep, it is more probable that societies develop into more and more controlled police-states where people's illusion of freedom is perpetuated," Thierry added.

"I agree. At some point we just have to decide if we still believe that our political leaders and business people who convene behind closed doors can make the best decisions for us. We can ignore them and create the kind of world that we aspire to. I think people nowadays are quick to adapt," I offered.

"It's true. Just a few days on the road has completely changed my worldview. It's rare to speak with people like you. Thanks guys!" Amelia was moved by the new perspectives.

"But even the new system needs anarchists to criticize it to make sure that we do not become overly complacent and think falsely that we live in a perfect world," Thierry wanted to have the last word. I agreed.

"Any other questions or can I go wash my feet? They smell like rotten eggs," I joked.

"Yeah, when do we eat?" Amelia smirked rubbing her belly. I smiled, gave her a quick kiss and moved to the kitchen. Soon there were twenty hitchhikers eating spicy vegetable couscous with fresh tzatziki.

Later—afer a few sips of cheap table wine and a couple of gruelingly strong beers—me and Amelia moved into a private bed room.

"Tell me more about the polyamory thing," Amelia chirped by my side.

"It's about having multiple relationships. There is no one way to go about it but in every relationship people define what it means for them. There are some common values however," I explained.

"What kind of values?"

"The most important is honest communication. Everything is discussed openly and even bad emotions are immediately addressed."

"Nice, what else?" Amelia asked.

"Respect and support is also important. It feels great when your partner shares openly all of her dreams and fears. Non-possessiveness means that you don't limit the life of your partner or think that you own her.
When you talk about jealousy you are able to handle it and understand the fears behind it. Eventually you learn compersion."

“What's that?” Amelia asked.

“It means getting satisfaction from the fact that your partner is satisfied, although the source of her pleasure was someone else.”

“Wow! Sounds amazing. What more?”

“Fidelity and loyalty,” I started.


“Yes, and loyalty for the common agreements. Cheating might not be going to bed with someone else but the fact that you don't tell that you are in a relationship,” I tried to give an example.

Amelia blushed. “Umm… Did I mention that I am in a relationship?”

“What?” I was flabbergasted. Damn, she’s full of surprises.

“I’ve been with him for two and half years already but it's not leading anywhere. It's a boring relationship,” Amelia told.

“But it's still a relationship,” I commented.

“Yeah, but… Remmus, everything changed when I met you,” Amelia’s eyes were watering. I kissed away her tears.

She climbed on top of me and the kisses became more and more passionate. We ripped each others’ clothes off and scattered them everywhere. Time to shag!

Then it happened again: Amelia retreated. What a horny prude!

“You know how to wipe a guy off his feet and… and then nothing!” I was frustrated.

“Remmus, I care about you so much,” Amelia sputtered. “I just don’t want to have sex with you because it would make me miss you even more when eventually we have to split.”

I didn’t know how to react. This is the age-old paradox: men need sex for emotional proximity and women need to feel emotionally close before having sex. It was so different with V.

Next day everyone would hitch to Barcelona to next pre-meeting on our way to Sines. Me, Amelia, Andrew and Natasha went together.

Amelia was wearing a colorful big-ass sombrero that we borrowed from Thierry. That—and her super-sexy shorts—made hitchhiking quite fast.

We got a ride from a German guy, Dietmar, who had taken five weeks off to criss-cross around Europe with his van that could easily accommodate four hitchhikers. Andrew took the front seat and entertained Dietmar for a while. Rest of us went to the back where there was a comfy bed and cushions. A bed and Amelia? Let’s see how this turns out.

Natasha passed out immediately. I covered her with the sombrero. Amelia was acting all too cute next to me. She stared me in the eye, smiled, and started kissing and caressing me. It sent impulses all over my body, not least to my crotch. Dietmar and Andy were oblivious to what’s happening in the back.

My hands traveled under Amelia’s t-shirt. I caressed her breasts. Every time I was about to zip open her tight shorts she took my hand away. “Have you ever fucked while hitching?” I whispered dirty talk in her ear. It turned her on even more. She would touch my groin softly and tease me with her tongue. But, as always, she stopped. Girl, you are making me crazy! Soon either my head or my balls will explode!

I noticed that Andrew had fallen asleep on the front seat. I thought it would be polite to socialize with Dietmar for a while. I leaned on the driver’s seat and we started talking about his life, his job in IT and future prospects of their company.

Dietmar talked, talked and talked. Somewhere between the interim report and the product portfolio I felt Amelia’s hand on my inner thigh. What the hell?

“Yes, interesting,” I commented on Dietmar’s ramblings. Amelia’s hand reached my boxers and she squeezed tenderly. Damn, that feels good!

“Oh, really?” I tried to appear interested as Dietmar’s monologue continued. Amelia’s hand was moving wildly in my pants. I can’t take this much longer!

Dietmar explained something about the competition in the field. I tried to keep a poker face. Amelia continued the hand job. God daaamm, woman! Fantastic! Dietmar talked about outsourcing to India.

Then it stopped. I mean, Amelia.

Dietmar continued… about differences between Mac and PC.

We were among the first to arrive in the squat somewhere in the outskirts of Barcelona. It was an orange four-storey building next to the railroad tracks. Most of the windows were shattered and the walls were covered in graffiti.

In the front yard there was a barbecue area where dogs barked and wagged their tails for greeting. We sat on a worn out sofa. There was food on the way, a lot of tobacco to be rolled and a bath tub full of common beer.

Given that they had occupied the building only for five months they had made a lot of progress already.
They were turning it into an amazing cultural centre. The first floor was still under construction. They had hauled in all sorts of circus equipment from trampolines to ropes and they had started building a stage for bands to perform.

The second floor had a bar, a lounge, an internet zone, an area for workshops and a free shop where you could leave what you don't need and take whatever you want—clothes, electronics, records, books, shoes, bags, art and even (unused) condoms.

The third floor was a kitchen and common living room. It also had the “rainbow rooms”—sleeping areas separated with huge colorful pieces of cloth for both guests and permanent residents alike. There was no real shower but just a bucket in a bathtub. We could wash ourselves and our clothes with only cold water because the DIY solar panels on the roof didn't generate enough electricity to warm up the water for everyone. There were approximately twenty students, artists and circus folks living in the squat permanently and the doors were open for travelers.

On the roof they were planning to have an organic garden where they could use the biowaste left over of mainly dumpster-dived food, and shit and piss that they collected in their dry latrines. Before the plantation could be built a few concrete walls still needed to be knocked down.

The weekend in Barcelona was fun. We took part in improving the cultural centre, partied with the locals, went to the beach for moon light swim, organized a parade promoting hitchhiking in the centre and planned our routes to Portugal.

With Amelia things didn’t progress much. The same sexual play continued. She got to witness what I could do with my tongue—and I’m not referring to my mother tongue—but she wouldn’t make love to me.

It pissed me off. I took a sledgehammer and ran to the roof to let the concrete wall feel my frustration. What the hell is wrong with this woman? “If I fucked you it would make me miss you even more.” Yeah right. Sounds like an excuse!

I felt that it was not a coincidence that our paths had crossed, that there was a deeper meaning in all this. She feels like a key that I need to get home. Every moment with her I felt a magical pull, and when she wasn’t there the pull was just stronger. But if she wasn’t ready to let me close physically, it was damn hard for me to become 100 percent close to her mentally, emotionally… or spiritually.

A long weekend of fishing had left me without a catch. We had slept next to each other for the past four nights but last night in Barcelona I stayed alone on the couch. I lit up a joint with other guys. The slim joint was rolled really tight. Somehow it reminded me of V. But rolling a joint that way makes it really tough to smoke; you have to suck it hard. I found it frustrating. Smoking was supposed to be relaxing, effortless. This reminded me of Amelia.
It was our last morning in Barcelona. I sent V an email and poured out my frustration regarding Amelia. I can't believe I'm missing two women simultaneously, although one of them is right next to me.

Amelia was about to go and meet her friends in Granada and Almeria and didn't know if she would make it to Portugal. Me and Andy had decided to take the South-bound route so we all were going to the same direction.

"Are you going with us today?" Amelia asked hesitantly.

"I guess so," I sighed.

"Remmus, please forgive me," Amelia noticed that I'm out of place.

"What's going on in your head? This foolishness has continued so many days. Your tempting behavior gets me all excited and then you just stop."

"I like you so much and I don't want to hurt you," she offered.

"What do you want of me? If you want us to be just friends then so be it: please stop making me so fucking horny all the time," I vented my desperation.

"Remmus, don't. The relationship I told you about. As you said: although boring, it's still a relationship," Amelia spoke almost crying.

"Is that what's bugging you?"

"That also. When I go back to Poland I will figure it out. I love traveling with you and being next to you. I'd really like to do it more... a lot more!" Amelia said and sounded like she's not only talking about going to Portugal.

"Ok. Fine. Thank you. So, are you coming to Sines?" I changed the topic.

"I don't know yet. In one week, on Sunday, we have to leave back to Poland. I have a volleyball camp I cannot miss."

We hugged, kissed and went for breakfast. "Mjam-mjam-mjam!" Amelia dug in to a fruit salad and swooshed off the fruit flies.

We split on a gas station somewhere near Tarragona. It all happened very fast. I came from the toilet with my re-filled water bottle and Andrew was waving at me, looking like an idiot in Thierry's sombrero. He had got a ride. "Go!" Amelia suggested, we hugged and she gave me a long moist kiss goodbye. Natasha hugged me also and wished good luck. It was time to sing "No woman, no cry."

Next four days were an important lesson in life. As for hitchhiking, it was mere suffering. Here some snapshots of images from Andalucia à la Andy & Remmus:

ROUTE: Calpe → Alicante → Murcia → Almeria
FOOD AND DRINKS

• One hour tour of supermarket dumpsters. Result: three pieces of baguette and Andy nagging that I didn't bring any olive oil or vinegar.
• Calamari with chocolate sauce and fresh green salad tossed in herbs (leftovers of tourists in a restaurant). “Are they bothering you?” a waiter comes to ask. “Let the boys eat,” says the father of the family.
• Upset stomach due to dumpster-dived McBullshit.
• Water melon, bread and beer from widows who loved our sombrero.
• Andrew stealing a dozen tomatoes from a huge garden. Stealing is wrong! Damn, they were tasty!
• Bread, pâté and olives straight from a wheelbarrow. Flushed down with whiskey.
• Oven-baked potatoes and chicken wings from restaurant tables.
• Red Cross Breakfast Bureaucracy (1.5 h): decaf and two biscuits.
• Minced-meat steaks with fries. Moroccan man paid and left to Holland.
• Worst day: three oranges.

PLACES TO SLEEP

• By the Peñón de Ifach rock in Calpe, next to local fishermen.
• On the beach in Alicante, 45 cm each from a pile of dog shit. I'm thinking: I dumpster-dive my food, sleep where ever and can't remember when was the last time I took a bath. How many bums, tramps and homeless people there were that tried to make a better world and ended up being socially excluded?
• In Almeria, on top of the castle walls. I'm thinking: Dude is living like a king! Only thing missing is the princess. But which one?

HITCHHIKING

• Andrew hitching motionless, his thumb hardly showing from behind the sign. Me harassing the drivers, waving like a windmill and smiling.
• Six hours on the road. Burning sun. +45 degrees Celsius. Dizzy. No water. Dust in every bodily orifice. No cigarettes.
• Andy wearing the sombrero and singing Scottish drinking songs. The Spaniard won't stop—not even if the hitchhiker would be bleeding to death, holding his bowels.
• Given up. Sleeping by the side of the road. Noise behind me. I wake up. Andy snoring on the other side, thumb still extended. A driver waiting. Hitched a ride while sleeping.
• First day: 65 km forward.
• Second day: 220 km forward.
• Third day: 0 km.
• Shortest ride: 50 meters (forward).

CONVERSATIONS:

• Outside of Alicante, hours without a ride.
  Me: “Dude, don't tell me you think of walking 80 km to Murcia!”
  Andy: “You reckon it's a bit far?”
• In Alicante suburbs. Everything is closed. It's like a ghost town.
  Me: “Do you think it's siesta or something?”
  A local: “No, it's economic crisis.”
• Done 20 km of walking.
  Andrew: “It was a shit day, I know. But Remmus, I promise you that we will have fun! I guarantee that we will have good time together. I'll use violence if necessary but we will have fun!”
• Andrew eventually gets us train tickets to Murcia.
  Andy: “Don't you dare tell anyone that we cheated and used the train!”
  Me: “I won’t.”
  Andy: “And you're not gonna put this in those books that you write, are you?”
• We meet a hitchhiker hippie who offers us a joint.
  Hitchhiker hippie: “No point hitching during the siesta. Better just smoke.”
  Andy: “Are you saying there are no cars at this hour?”
  Hippie: “Might be. But better smoke.”
Me: “Why shouldn’t you hitchhike?”
Hippie: “Difficult to get rides when you’re stoned.”

• We’ve been five minutes in a car.
  The driver: “Do you smoke hash?”
  Me (whispering to Andy): “Did he smell? Is he throwing us out?”
  Andy: “I think he’s offering some.”
  Me (to the driver): “Oh, no thanks. No money.”
  The driver: “It doesn’t cost anything. Take some!” The driver rolls a joint in 30 seconds while driving 160 km/h.

• At the gas station. I approach a guy smoking a cigarette. I’m holding a sign that has “Almeria” written on it.
  Me: “Sorry, can I bum a cigarette please?”
  The man: “Almeria? I can take you.”

• At the night club. Andy is smashed. Music is insanely loud.
  Me: “Andy, that stunningly gorgeous woman has been eyeing you for ages. Do something!”
  Andy: “She’s a whore for all I know!”
  The woman approaches our table. She asks Andy to dance. Pause in music.
  Andy: “I don’t touch prostitutes!”
  Heads turn to our table. Music continues. Everyone looks at us, shocked. The woman starts crying and runs away.

• We are lining up to get breakfast at Red Cross. There’s a beautiful clerk. I absolutely hate the bureaucracy but fancy her.
  Clerk: “Occupation?”
  Me: “A human being.”
  Clerk: “Married?”
  Me: “No. Are you?”
  Clerk: “Phone number?”
  Me: “Sure. Give it. I’ll try to call.”

NOTES

• Beneficio: a hippie community in Orgiva, Southern Spain. Can go without prior notice.
• Hitchhiking (life) is simple: choose a road and let the universe take care of the rest. You can always come back.
• Remmus <3 Amelia.

HITCHHIKING IN SPAIN

Try hitching in Spain. They’ll ignore you.
Try harder. They’ll ignore you.
Get to a better spot. They’ll ignore you.
Try super politely, dress up well in bright colors, get to the best hitch-hiking spot ever, smile wide and long… They’ll ignore you.
Ignore them. They’ll ignore you.
Ignore them. They’ll ignore you.
Ignore them. Someone might pick you up.
ME AND ANDY HAD BEEN hitching like hell but we just didn't seem to make any progress. I had received an email from Amelia. She was on her way to Almeria so we stayed and waited, for two reasons: 1) It would make traveling faster, and 2) I missed her like crazy. I was no longer bearing a grudge for her. I had learned to see things from her perspective and understood that she was in the middle of an intense change process. She saw in me future possibilities she had been oblivious of before. Amelia's hitchhiking career had started in Poland where her university had organized a hitchhiking contest that she had won. She had received a big bronze thumb as a prize. That had sparked her to go on this life changing trip. Now she saw her dreams clearly like the heat waves rising from the asphalt.

Usually the destination is not important for hitchhikers. They enjoy the process with all its small details, nuances and seemingly insignificant moments. But now we all had destination clear in our mind: reaching Sines, Portugal by tomorrow night!

Amelia and Natasha came to Almeria and spotted a familiar-looking sombrero on the beach. Natasha came to hug me first. "Remmus!" she was exhilarated. "It's so good to see you again!" I rejoiced and gave a peck on her cheek. She went on to hug Andy. Amelia came to me and kissed me right away, long and adoringly.

"I missed you," she whispered with a tear drop in her eye.

"I missed you too. It was stupid to leave you at the gas station."

They told their story of the past few days. Hitching in Andalucia had not been easy even for them. Some fucking fish merchant had groped Amelia on some small murky road. Natasha had screamed at the top of her lungs and made him stop.

Andy told how desperately difficult it had been for us to catch rides. From now on we'd all go together or in boy-girl pairs. It should increase both speed and safety.

"Well, why don't we go towards Malaga then?" I suggested. We walked to the road although it was already getting late.

Amelia and Natasha were thumbing, while we chilled with Andy. The first car stopped in less than two minutes.

"What the fuck??" Andrew screamed out loud, "It's not possible!"

We were amused by his reaction but the driver wiped the smile off our faces by speeding off without us. Would have taken the girls, alright.

"You asshole kurwa!" Natasha was shouting at the driver. Kurwa is bitch. It was the most common Polish word and Natasha kept using it like a comma… or in this case an exclamation mark.

We walked a bit forward. Amelia stayed in the traffic lights. Her long legs were stunning. Her smile could melt even the most hardened Spanish soul. And the way she moved her hips was sure to catch their attention.

But there was no ride.

Natasha looked exhausted and frustrated. "Malaga kurrrwa!" she was shouting at the passing cars and stomping her feet. It cracked us up.

Eventually we got a ride to the outskirts of El Ejido, some 35 km away. We hitched for a while in dim-lit roundabout but finally we reckoned it's better to sleep here and continue in the morning.

We went to the shrubbery, looked for even terrain and laid down our sleeping bags. "It's pretty neat that we wake up in the morning right next to a hitching spot, right Andy?!" The lad had fallen asleep. He still had his thumb extended and a sign next to him: "I am going to Portugal. Where are you headed?" Pretty hardcore hitchhiker! Well, it wouldn't be the first time to catch a ride asleep.

"Remmus, this is my first night sleeping outside," Amelia mumbled.
“Sleep well sweetie. Tomorrow we go to Sines.” I could hardly believe what I was saying. Sines was still some 800 kilometers away in the west coast of Portugal, and we were stranded in the backwoods of El Ejido. This can’t be happening! I’m wasting time, criss-crossing for five weeks and when the Hitchgathering is about to start I might be late. But maybe we can make it. I somehow have a good feeling about tomorrow.

There was a a weird moaning sound coming from the shrubbery. Something cracked behind us. Oh, ok, Remmus is going to sleep with one eye open.

In the morning I was washing my shirt in the gas station toilet when Amelia barged in.

“Remmus, what the heck are you doing? We got a ride!” she announced. I ran after her. Good timing! It’s 6:30 am and we are moving!

The driver was going to Orgiva. I noted to Andy that the hitchhiker hippie had mentioned the place. “It’s not on our way. Today we go to Portugal!” Andy was boasting with confidence. We left the car and the driver continued North.

Hitching by the side of the road took time. Finally we had to walk a few kilometers to a gas station in the next small town, Salobreña. Again, we were faced with no success and doubt started creeping in. If a hundred hitchhikers are gathering today to have fun in Sines and we miss that… No! I admired Andrew who persistently stood on the road, thumbing up with his sign.

“We are going to grow old together here,” even Amelia was frowning after waiting for one hour. I gave her a kiss and tried to pep her up. If she ever lost the smile on her face it was a definite sign of a bad spot. We are not going to make it.

“Guys! Come on! What are you waiting for?” Andrew was exhilarated. What’s gone into him? “Come! I got us a ride!” Andrew repeated. Well, if it isn’t a miracle!

“All the way to Malaga?” Amelia asked in doubt. “Yeah, yeah. Come on!” Andrew motioned towards a small white car. The driver had dreadlocks and black shades that covered his eyes. He was really helpful.


“Remmus,” I greeted him biting my lip.

“Hi, Natasha;” she introduced herself.

“Gopi,” the driver repeated. She burst into laughter.

Gopi was driving really fast towards Malaga, playing 80s rock. I enjoyed the magnificent Mediterranean views from the window. Sun was shining. The refreshing breeze messed up my hair. Company was great. It didn’t matter anymore if we reached Sines today or tomorrow.

Natasha sat between me and Amelia in the back. I played with Amelia’s curls. She wanted to kiss me. I took the sign and covered Natasha’s face with it. We leaned over her to kiss each other.

“Let’s make it easier,” Natasha laughed, took a kiss from Amelia and passed it on my cheek. I leaned forward as if to pass the kiss to Andrew. Girls laughed. Love… I felt deep love. I loved all these people and I was so thankful for this moment.

At the next gas station we split up in two pairs. Andrew and Natasha went first. “See you in Sines!” Amelia waved at them. She was happy to spend some quality time alone with me. After one hour we got a ride to Sevilla.

Our driver Marco was a talkative lad who, however, didn’t know a word of English. He couldn’t handle silence so he started singing Spanish folk songs. I made him very happy, singing the Karelian anthem:

_In our dulcet Finland could there be more cherished land,_
_than our beautiful Karelia, the vast homeland of song!
_Song is in its foaming rapids, splashing waves of the lakes,_
_the woods full of melodies, the everlasting pines hum._

_We don’t have much wealth, nor is our land rich with grain,_
_but we have an abundance of song that grows without sowing._
_It’s not weakened by the Eastern frost, nor the Northern cold,_
_It’s not struck down by oppression, nor hit by the hails._

_When the people of Finland face harsh persecution,_
_our poor Karelia makes music of their sorrow._
_And when better times dawn again in Finland,_
_the great rejoicing echoes from Karelia!_

In Sevilla we got stuck at a gas station for quite some time.

“We are not going to make it,” Amelia lost her hope momentarily. She said she felt dizzy. It was the dizzy time of the month for her—The Japanese Flag Days—and the scorching sun didn’t help much. Nonetheless, knowing that she had menstruation was kind of a relief. Now she had a valid reason to refrain from sex and
I had no intention to go spear first facing The Red Army. I could just enjoy her sweet company and forget about any other intentions. It felt that our relationship was changing, becoming deeper.

"Should we get some wine?" Amelia suggested and popped inside to buy an one-euro wine. Before we opened it we asked from the cops who were topping up their tank if it was okay to drink in public.

"Of course you can drink wine in public. Alcohol no!" the officer explained. Oh, wine is not alcohol here. Ultimately we got a ride from a nice surfer who dropped us in the middle of the road… somewhere.

"Not too much traffic here," Amelia said with an uneasy smile. Sun was scorching. It was absolutely quiet, apart from a few crickets here and there.

"Now every car is precious," I noted. There was a distant roar. We took positions and got ready for the car that finally came out behind the curve. It passed. And it was silent again. Mere thumbing wouldn't help us right now. This called for aggressive hitching.

When the next car appeared we were jumping like crazy. It passed.

"Damn it! Is this the end of the line?" I asked Amelia.

"Don't worry. Let's walk a little bit," she responded encouragingly.

A yellow eight-wheeler came down the hill and stopped.

"Can you take us to a gas station?" Amelia chirped.

"Hop in!" the driver agreed.

It was a short 10-kilometer ride. We couldn't help laughing when we saw the local interpretation of a gas station. It was a small shack on top of a hill—no wider than two meters—with a lonely gas pump on the yard rusting in the heat. We got to be the first hitchhikers ever to reach this El Pendejo Fuckall, population twelve.

To our surprise the first car that came up the hill stopped. The driver agreed to take us to Portugal, about 80 kilometers from Sines. Damn, we are actually going to make it in time!

I don't know if it was the wine, the period, the heat, the knowledge that we had a safe ride to Portugal or a combination of these that made Amelia pass out. I only realized that she was sleeping when I heard her snoring. A girl as pretty as a princess snoring like a beer-bellied truck driver from Albania. Is it annoying the driver?

I held her nose softly and she stopped snoring. There was no sound. She was still. Oh fuck! It was as if she had stopped breathing. I slapped her gently on the cheek. No reaction. I slapped harder. Nothing. I couldn't feel her pulse. Damn it! Panicking, I started shaking her from her shoulders.

"Are we there yet?" Amelia opened her eyes momentarily, wiped off some drool, turned to hug me and closed her eyes again. I sighed in relief. Extremely nice that she's alive.

We got our last ride in the middle of the highway. George and Leandro were not even supposed to go to Sines but when they heard of our adventures they wanted to make sure we get to our final destination.

We reached the camping site parking lot and saw a sign "6-8-10 Yes—Oui—Ken".

"We did it! We are here!" Amelia rejoiced.

"Eight hundred kilometers in one day! And it's not even dark yet. Un-fucking-believable!" I was bouncing of joy.

"Yes we can!" Amelia hollered. Yes, oui, ken… Yes we can? Oh, that's what it meant. I felt like such a moron that I had not figured the pun out.

We were welcomed by approximately twenty hitchhikers who had gathered around a fire. There was no trait of Andrew and Natasha. We were among the first. There were just a few familiar faces from Lyon and Barcelona.

"We beat them!" Amelia grinned at our achievement. She was a funny sight: covered in sweat and remains of the torn sombrero hanging from her neck.

"Even the sombrero made it," I laughed.

We got a warm welcome. When people saw how tattered we were, they gave us soup, bread, cigarettes, beer and wine. "Mjam-mjam-mjam!" Amelia smelled the food in awe.

I recalled the CouchSurfing event in Paris. A slightly diferent vibe. Although it was a group of young international travelers also here, the atmosphere was completely diferent. No superficial bullshit but a feeling of one big happy family.

Hitchhikers were uniied by the fact that everyone had gone through a lot of hardships to make it here. Mutual respect was tangible. We passed on the good vibes and welcomed every newcomer. No other prize was needed for this achievement than the mere smile of fellow human beings. We were happy just to sit there, eating, drinking, smoking and socializing.

"Yes we can!" I heard a familiar Scottish voice behind me. I ran to hug Andy. Eww! This guy is… nice and sweaty. Natasha followed and I hugged her too.

"Remmus, where's Amelia? How long have you been here?" she asked.

"About an hour," I said and pointed at Amelia who came to greet them as well.

"You beat us, although we left earlier," Andrew snarled gritting his teeth and smiling.

"We got lucky. I'm so happy that you made it as well," Amelia said.

"Welcome to Sines, bro!" I helped Andy to take off his backpack.
Quick intoxication. Early to bed. The road had taken its toll. Me and Amelia crashed in an American hitchhiker’s tent—with a permission.

In the morning we convened for our first sit-together. The more experienced hitchhikers explained the history of Hitchgathering. First time had been a nutty spontaneous idea to gather next to the Eifel tower in Paris on 8th August 2008 under the project name 8-8-8. Next year 9-9-9 took place in Ukraine. And now 6-8-10 in Portugal. Not too easy targets.

The program of the Hitchgathering was entirely up to the participants. There were cardboards where anyone could suggest workshops, discussions and other activities.

Also practicalities were handled together: dumpster-diving in the centre of Sines and collecting donations for common wine. Dumpster-diving it is! The kitchen welcomed volunteers. So we cook! We also agreed to clean up the mess left by the previous campers.

One kilometer away there was a lovely beach where most of the people ended up. The day passed playing in the waves and bathing in the sun naked. I was resting my head on Amelia’s lap, the waves were splashing in the shore and sun was warming my skin. I was watching the group of at least 30 different nationalities enjoying the beach. Their common denominator was a burning passion for life. The whole scene reminded me of The Beach—the Leonardo Di Caprio flick.

The film reminded me that nothing lasts forever. Amelia is leaving tomorrow. I had gotten used to the idea of being close to her every night and day. Life with her was a bliss. Everything comes to an end. Just have to let go. I started to prepare for her departure emotionally. Although, maybe I should prepare for it alcoholically…

In the evening I took Amelia by hand and walked her away from other people. We sat down on some rocks under the trees and I offered her wine. I didn’t feel bad sipping the common wine alone with her because I had done my share in dumpster-diving and cooking to contribute to everyone’s well-being.

“Don’t worry,” she said when I told her how much I’d miss her. I tried to avoid shedding tears. Don’t worry? That’s a good attitude.

I was impressed by how well-balanced she appeared to be. She knew how to enjoy life. She was ready to go on life-changing trips like this without fear and still kept her priorities straight. Physiotherapy was a calling for her. She wanted to help others in a concrete manner. She had almost a supernatural gift to put herself in someone else’s shoes and feel his pain as her own. It was as if her mission was to relief the suffering of people around her.

She was playing volleyball and enjoyed every moment of it but she was aware that it was not her whole life. And she was in a relationship which, it seemed, she was ready to let go to enable other experiences in her life.

I couldn’t believe she was just nineteen, knowing what kind of kid I had been ten years ago. I felt happy for her but hated the fact that she was leaving. I was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: should I spend every waking moment as close to her as possible or start hanging out with other people to actually enjoy the rest of the gathering? I went for the latter option.

Amelia went back to Natasha.

There were some people playing music next to the shower premises. I joined the circle. Our lead guitarist was Radek—a Czech guy who had escaped from his boring nine-to-five life just a couple of weeks ago. He had worked at Finnish elevator company KONE. He hated his boss whose mood went up and down like a malfunctioning elevator.

“I left without telling anyone,” Radek said.

“Just like that?” I was astonished by his courage.

“Yeah. Boss called me on Tuesday and asked why I was not at work. I told him I was hitchhiking and wouldn’t come back. He claimed that I have to. I told him that I don’t have to—not because he says so… Finnish wanker!” Radek grinned.

“What are you up to after this?” I asked.

“Let’s see. I might go to Beneficio. Have you heard about it?” Radek asked.

“Yeah. The hippie community.”

“Want to join?” Radek asked enthusiastically.

“We’ll see,” I answered.

Radek had an amazing grunge voice, reminding of Kurt Cobain. He gave the guitar to a Dutch girl called Lena who was also a pretty good singer. Her friend, Lydia, was playing melodica—the instrument that makes a sullen sound when you blow in it and press the keys. Radek collected some pots and spoons and made himself a drum set. I found an empty water bottle and a small kitchen knife. It was like guiro but sounded more like a drum. I was amazed that I could keep up to the rhythm.

We gradually got more and more company. New instruments were either invented or fetched from the tents. We soon had an improvised Big Band of about ten people.

“Let’s go to the town!” someone suggested.

We started our slow parade towards the center of Sines. We were looping about four songs that we started to master the more we played. People on the streets clapped their hands in the rhythm and restaurant terraces...
filled with joy when we arrived. Duffy’s “Mercy” was our definite bravura: You got me begging you for mercy… Why won’t you release me… It made the audience wild every time.

Girls collected some coins from people who wanted to support our multicultural group. For a passing moment I felt like quitting because I had sworn myself I would never do anything for money, but then I reckoned it was the girls asking for the coins and it would go to the common donation box anyways.

I did, however, accept alcohol donations. Another rule to my ever-growing moral rules: never accept donations if they come in the form of cold, hard coins—but always accept donations if they come in the form of cold, foamy beer or hard liquor!

We took a break on the church stairs and some local boys said we should go to a nearby nightclub and play. We followed the tip and entered a small dark room where there were just a handful of people.

Our music faced tough competition from the antagonizing euro-dance-shit blasting from the loudspeakers so we left. On the door a bouncer saw me with the kitchen knife, was taken aback and said I cannot bring something like that in the nightclub. “Dude, I’m going out of the club!” I laughed and we continued towards the shore.

There was a big restaurant with an open-air stage. When the customers heard us playing they urged us to climb on the stage. We were joined by a local rapper and his posse. Soon we were some fifteen people on the stage, playing, rapping, moshing, singing and stomping our feet. Parents brought their small kids to dance on the stage and youngsters banged trays and beer mugs to join the somewhat well orchestrated cacophony of sound.

By closing time, 3 am, the audience didn’t want us to leave. Hrm, why are there six mean-looking bull-sized men staring at us? Seemingly the security guards did want us to leave. We had not even realized that we had been playing for so long.

Little by little the mass of people oozed out of the area but the music never stopped. On my way out I collected leftovers from the tables and invited others for the feast as well. It was too much food to eat by myself. “Mjam-mjam-mjam” Amelia would say.

Once we reached the camping area most of the people had gone to sleep already. My night cap was a mixture of wine, weed and vodka… Night cap? Or more of a night furry hat?

Amelia had laid her sleeping bag next to a tree. In the tent it was too hot. She started to get accustomed to sleeping in the fresh air outside. To avoid the grueling pain and to forget the fact that she was leaving in the morning, I had left to the town with others and got shitfaced. Now I could only pass out next to this sleeping beauty, knowing it was our last night side by side. I was drunk and miserable. Yes… we…

Snore…
The Plaster and the Cave People

“REMMUS, DON’T WORRY!” AMELIA HAD said before leaving. Somehow it felt like she really meant it—that she had found that place of happiness, serenity and tranquility inside of her that allowed her to stand tall in the withering storms of the harsh physical reality.

It was a defining moment. I sat in the swing on a playground, right next to the camping area and I could not keep a stiff upper lip anymore. I let my emotions surface and tears were flowing down my cheeks uncontrollably. It was not only an end to our time together but also the last day of the Hitchgathering. I had reached my destination after five weeks, some 8000 kilometers and many new contacts and experiences later. But now I was alone.

I cried.

Then I cried some more.

Maybe all I was trying to do last night was to avoid the pain of facing the truth: Everything in life is in constant change, coming and going, leaving and returning, again and again. And what did I do? Got drunk to repress the truth.

Falling in love without hurting yourself in the process was next to impossible. I had acted as if I was a stupid hungry ish that had caught the bait and still—clinging to a hook and lapping in the air—thought that the juicy worm was almost there for the taking, not realizing that the blade of the fisherman’s knife was about to cut my throat. How could I ever learn to love without unnecessary attachment?

It was as if the weather adjusted to my feelings. It started drizzling. My tears mixed with the rain drops that played their bittersweet symphony on my face and washed the salty lavor down to my lips that had no partner anymore.

She is gone. As quickly as she had entered my life, she had also let. I cried more than ever before.

Radek came to comfort me. He gave me some wine and said: “When something ends, something new starts.” Maybe he was referring to our earlier plan of hitchhiking together to Beneficio or maybe he just found the right words at the right time. Next to Radek was a Turkish traveler, Emel, who rolled me a cigarette and let me rest my head on her lap.

Okay, girl… go, go, go! Run Amelia, and live your dream. If our paths are meant to unite, they will. If we are meant to unite… The thought of it made me smile. The positive vibes radiating from Radek and Emel eased my sobbing and eventually I started smiling again.

“Let’s go get some breakfast” I suggested.

Soon we dragged a heavy bag full of fresh bread to the camp. We had found them from the local bakery. People were just waking up and coming out of their tents.

“Free bread for all!” I shouted.

Suddenly a herd of hungry hitchhikers was surrounding the box and there was more than enough for everyone. “What the fuck?” someone exclaimed looking at the pile of bread. People dug in like vultures.

Radek and Emel were happy. We smiled to each other. It was amazing to make such a large number of people happy with so little effort. Encouraged by this I used the rest of the day in the kitchen. Bread, red wine and some more bread sufficed for lunch. How about dinner? Barbequed ish, vegetable risotto, fried zucchini steaks… and sauce with red wine? I took a sip of the wine. No, brown sauce will do…

People enjoyed the dinner whole-heartedly. I had spent the whole day drinking wine and hassling in the kitchen. The sorrow caused by Amelia’s departure was a distant memory. Soon enough, though, it would come back to haunt me.

“Mjam-mjam-mjam!” someone said behind me. Amelia? I turned. There was a smart looking blonde wiping her lips after a well-enjoyed dinner. She looked like a hybrid between an activist and a career woman: classy eyeglasses on well made-up face, combined with relaxed outfit and tribal tattoos.

“You cooked this?” She asked and introduced herself as Hana. I offered wine and we started chatting. She said she was from “Slutvenia” or thereabouts. She is intelligent, funny… She said she was a singer in a punk band. And she has edge! Oh, what the hell! What more could a man ask from a plaster relationship?
“Mjam-mjam-mjam!” Hana enjoyed the wine.
“Stop that!” I exclaimed with a smile.
“Mjam-mjam-mjam?”
“Yes, that! It reminds me too much of Amelia,” I said and told her briefly about our love story.
“Juicy story. Mjam-mjam-mjam!” Hana annoyed me deliberately and came closer. I put my hand on her shoulder.
“Seriously, stop that! Or I have to shut your mouth,” I teased.
“How?” Hana flirted and looked deep into my eyes.
Radek passed by and pushed our faces together. Our lips touched. “Connecting people!” Radek exclaimed and strolled away. I was baffled. Hana turned my head back and kissed me properly.
“What are you thinking?” she finally asked.
“I’m thinking… if you’d like to fuck?” I slipped. To get rid of all the sexual frustration, that kept building up inside me, I really needed someone to fuck my brains out. Even if it was only an one night stand, at this point, it would really help to clear my head up.

The reputation of Slutvenians proved to be correct. A moment later we were having sex in a nearby hammock. It was a surprisingly cozy and intimate place, although passers-by—or the owners of the hammock—didn’t have to guess twice to know what’s happening.
Hana was lying on her back on top of me. Shaved pussy. Just like Amelia! I caressed her clitoris. She was horny and cried for me to get inside of her.

What a tempting ass. No time for condoms. With ease, I entered through the back door. Hana was taken by surprise but soon she was moaning with pleasure, pumping like wild rabbit and paddling her pink canoe.
It was spontaneous. It was primordially dirty. It was wonderful.
“We should have a lot of sex before parting ways.” Hana said in the shower. I agreed and thanked Krishna for Slutvenians.

Next day we tried to leave but we were unsuccessful so we headed for the beach. Although we had not advanced at all, the road had taken its toll. After taking a dip in the ocean I lay on the sand and passed out.
I woke up in Hana’s gentle kissing. Little by little the kisses became more erotic and like a mind-reader she asked: “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I nodded, we got up and walked to the less crowded end of the beach. We lay down on the sand caressing each other.
For a while we tried to be cautious of the seldom passers-by. We became more and more horny. Soon we didn’t care if we were seen or not.

There was something, however, we couldn’t ignore: the vicious sand found its way to the most imaginative places and made it a tad more difficult to enjoy the moment. For a couple of times we’d run into the waves to wash off the sand and start all over again. But all this seemed to make Hana just more excited.
The beach allowed much more room for creativity than the hammock. We fucked like stray dogs… and cats, and frogs, and 69 missionary cow-girls hiding the salami between the hoopdie hoops in wild rodeo and glowling at the badger in the electric chair. So to speak.
Radek and Emel could easily interpret the wide smiles on our faces but before they could comment anything Hana pitched an idea: “Let’s get some wine and liquor and get absolutely wasted! My treat.” She got five liters of wine and a bottle of whiskey.
“May I offer the food?” I asked.
“Didn’t you say you live without money?” Hana wondered.
“Come!” I took her to the fanciest restaurant in town. Radek and Emel stayed out, smoking cigarettes. Even I was surprised when the restaurant manager asked us to wait that he wraps some food in tinfoil.
“By the way, this is our first date.” I said in the candle light and I offered her some pieces of baguette, butter, olives and tuna paste that were left on the table.
“Oh yeah! This is amazing! Thank you!” Hana was glowing.
When we came out with a plastic bag full of food Radek was astonished: “How did you do that?” He couldn’t fathom.
“We just asked,” Hana said with a content grin on her face.
We took the food to the camp and opened the dishes. The smell of meatballs, rice, spaghetti Bolognese and roasted chicken filled the air. People were thrilled to see gourmet food. Everything was gone in less than five minutes.
We sat down in a circle and started passing the drinks. Joints were lit up one after another. “You know, the food was so good I don’t want to shit,” Hana joked.
It cracked me up. “The sex was so good I’ll never wash the condom,” I answered. Hana laughed hysterically. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Radek had overheard the conversation.
“I said that the food was so good I’ll never wash the condom,” Hana told.
I was laughing in tears.
“What?” Radek was mystified.
“The sex was so good I don't want to shit!” I exclaimed.
Hana rolled on the ground and wiped her eyes.
It took us a while to calm down. "Oooh, everything just spins," Hana said, looked at the stars and held
fingers on her temples.
"Shit. It does. You're right," I agreed. I figured there was wisdom larger than life in her comment. The whole
universe and everything in it spins. Spin is the only constant. I could visualize everything from the tiniest
particle to the grand vastness of galaxies being in constant spin. I looked into that image in my mind's eye and
zoomed out. I could see how our universe was reduced to a tiny droplet that was connected to other universes,
spinning around wildly in complete harmony and forming other entities that were not larger or smaller than
what we had got used to but merely a cyclical phenomenon: the spin of the universe. Momentarily the spin
replaced my linear 3D thinking. There was no beginning or end. No alpha or omega. No big and small. No
yin and yang. No woman, no man. No us and them. Everything just curved together in an infinite loop of
quarks, atoms, people, planets, galaxies and universes.
Everything was merely spinning... not least the head of Remmus Reverof. Hana escorted me to go to sleep.
We laid down our sleeping bags under the star-lit sky.
"Want to have sex?" Hana asked.
"What do you want of me?"
"Nothing. When Amelia left I just desperately needed to fuck someone," I put it out honestly.
Surprisingly, honesty worked. "Oh, okay. Let's sleep then," Hana seemed to be satisfied with the answer
and made herself comfortable next to me.
As I opened my eyes in the morning Hana was leaning her head on her hand and staring me in the eye.
"What?" I said.
"I've been thinking about your behavior. You are clearly a little bit out," she analyzed. Out? Seems so. Nice
clouds.
"Coming here was one of the best decisions in my life. All these backpacking, hitchhiking and dumpster-
diving experiences are completely new to me. But I think everyone here is escaping from something. What
are you escaping from, Remmus?"
Quite serious topic this early in the morning. "I don't think I'm escaping from anything. Not anymore. In the
beginning I probably was escaping the dullness of everyday life but now I'm merely going towards something
new and unexplored," I explained. Then I told her briefly about the student loan discussion with the bailiff.
"So you just left the debt unpaid? Quite irresponsible," Hana frowned.
"We are never able to pay all the debt in this world. My 4 500 Euro is quite small compared to the interest
we have to pay on the public debt. Finland should be one of the least debt-ridden countries in EU but
it doesn't stop us from paying the banks in interest payments almost the equivalent of our annual defense
budget," I pondered.
"So you left everything behind and just walked away?" Hana asked.
I shook my head. "No, I hitched!"
We separated in good terms, as friends. I could have been confused with all these girls barging in from
doors and windows but now everything felt clear.
Hana—I could just cherish the memory and leave her behind. Mmm... her behind. The relationship with
Amelia could turn out which ever way. It was not mere lust but deeper companionship of souls. She was like
a mirror that reflected my innermost emotions. I decided to give her time to fix her life. Her time would
come. Weeks on the road had profoundly changed her world view.
V, on the other hand, was the personification of all the wishes I had made for every shooting star in the
galaxy. With her it had been disgustingly romantic from the very beginning. She had let me close quickly
and although I hardly knew her V definitely had a special allure. She was the voice of reason and I was the
dreamer. I could only hope that opposites continue to attract each other.
I missed her. We had agreed over email to meet soon in Basel, Switzerland. She had two weeks of vacation
coming up that she wanted to use in hitchhiking with me. The road would teach what we needed to learn
from each other.
The road, after all, is the ultimate manifestation of love. You have to have blind trust in the fact that some
larger than life force, love, always guides you to choose the right road among the infinite possibilities.
I got back on the road, alone. I walked to the parking lot of a nearby mall. There was a camper van with
Swiss plates. This is too good to be true! It got my hopes up.
I approached the family man who was packing the car.
"Entschuldigung!" I said in German. No reaction. Damn! Why does Switzerland have so many official
languages?
"Excusez-moi?" I tried in French. The guy just continued hauling in plastic bags.
"Mi scusi, fucking hell, stgisa!" I added some Italian, cussing and Romansch. Now he turned his head.
“How can I help you?” the lad spoke perfect English. It turned out to be a rental car. The family was Portuguese and they were going 20 minutes away to Porto Covo. No ride to Switzerland this time.

“I’m going North. Would you give me a ride out of this parking lot?” I settled for less now. They agreed. Wait a minute. Porto Covo? That’s South. Hana might have mentioned it. Lovely beach I heard. And Emel said they might be going there today. I decided, out of a whim, to go all the way with the family. Shit! What happened to my determination? Why did I give in so easily? I was not headed north and it pissed me off, but I knew there was some reason for this detour.

I found out the reason quite soon. Porto Covo was not just one beach but a series of dozens of sandy strips and beautiful cliffs, caressed by the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. This is a paradise on Earth!

I first visited a local market in the centre of Porto Covo. I looked into the bins and found a bit squashed but edible tomatoes, plums, nectarines and melons. When the vendors saw this they brought more stuff from behind the counter. “Obrigado!” I thanked them and left towards the beach.

On my way I bumped into Emel and Radek. They were covered in dirt.

“What are you doing here?” Radek wondered.

“No idea. Am I not welcome?” I asked with a blink in my eye.

“Of course! Cool, man!” Radek was excited.

“I just pop into that bakery,” I said. Soon I got out with a huge bag of bread.


“Yes,” I gave the bag to Radek.

“You’re really talented in this,” Emel marveled.

“I just have no shame. Shame is not natural. We learn to be ashamed at a very young age due to our upbringing and social conditioning,” I responded.

“Okay, but why exactly I feel ashamed and you don’t?”

“I had to unlearn it. Your parents probably told you not to play with your pussy when you were small, and since that you’ve learned all sorts of things you are not supposed to do,” I smirked.

“Like not to rely on other people’s help,” Radek gave an example.

“Exactly! Well said,” I tapped him on the back.

I hitched with them to a beach called Praia des Oliverinhas where others were already.

“Let’s go for a swim,” Emel suggested as soon as we got there. We ran straight into the waves completely naked. More people arrived, all covered in oil, mud and sand.

“What the hell happened to you?” I asked Emel.

“We helped to push a car out of sand,” Emel hollered and washed her face.

“The driver gave us forty euros!” Radek was excited.

“We got food and wine for everyone!” Emel said and dove into the waves.

Soon everyone was naked, enjoying the chilled salty water and fooling around like kids. In a moment Thierry shouted from the cliffs: “Guys, do you want to have a great night at the beach or an amazing one? Just ten minutes that way!” He had been scouting to see what was further down the beach. We trusted his judgment and followed him, carrying our stuff. I collected a couple of dry tree trunks on the way to set up the fire. No one was prepared to see such an amazingly beautiful secluded beach with a natural cave and spring water splashing through the crevices in the rock.

I placed my sleeping bag right in the opening of the cave where I would be close to the fire place, I could see the stars and still have cover if it rained.

It was getting dark so I started assembling the fire.

“You know it’s illegal to make an open fire here?” Emel noted.

“I don’t give a shit. You’ll thank me later.” I said and made the flames bigger. That lured everyone around and even Emel pushed aside her fear of cops. We prepared a dinner together: barbequed vegetables, tin foiled potatoes, salad and some fresh bread to go with it. Nineteen hitchhikers engaged in cheerful chatter.

Thierry’s girlfriend Lucia introduced a canon song called “Pick a Bale of Cotton” that originated from the times of slavery in America. We created our own lyrics better suited for hitchhikers:

_Slow down, turn around, pick up a hitchhiker._  
_Slow down, turn around, take us on the way!_  
_Pick-a, pick-a, pick-a, pick-a, pick up a hitchhiker._  
_Pick-a, pick-a, pick-a, pick-a, take us on the way!_  
Hey, driver, pick up a hitchhiker.  
Hey, driver, take us all the way!

We got carried away with the song and continued for at least fifteen minutes. I tried to provide a beat with a few empty bottles and a piece of sugarcane. It started silently and ended up in everyone roaring enthusiastically.
It was an amazing night in a magical place.
In the morning no one wanted to leave so we ended up staying another night. The day was well spent, lazing on the beach and dumpster-diving in Porto Covo.

I realized that we wouldn't be seeing each other any time soon. After the dinner I introduced a game where everyone had a named paper and they were circulated around so long that everyone would have their own paper back. The idea was to write greetings for others. Writing for 18 people took some time but people were excited of this emotional exercise. The sun set and last rounds were lit only by the fire in the middle. The papers were full of nice greetings, personal confessions and thankful notes from others.

Emel was reading her paper in tears. Soon she came to me and sputtered: “You made me cry!” She hugged me and sobbed. This is what it said in her paper:

Emel, I have noticed that you are afraid of many things. It’s in vain.
The biggest decision in my life was to stop being afraid and let the love guide the way. That decision was followed by smaller decisions of polyamory, moneyless life etc. I’m only in the beginning of the path of love but I can say it’s worth it. All of our emotions derive from either fear or love. All inhibitions and doubts are caused by fear. They have no place on the path of love. It’s your choice.
Remmus
The Road to Heaven

Before leaving the beach a nudist guy that had just arrived demanded to take a group picture of us. We huddled together and the nudist stood in front of us with the camera. “I can see his penis,” I whispered and everyone burst into laughter.

These couple of days had been an example of an ideal community that represents total freedom, helping others and the culture of sharing—communality, in one word. Maybe this is a prelude for the future.

“I guess it’s you and me again, mate.” I tapped Andrew on the shoulder and motioned towards the road.

“Yeap!” he answered and shoved his towel in his backpack. He continued: “Listen, Remmus, I don’t know if I’m able to hitch today.”

“Why?” I was baffled.

“It’s a little bit embarrassing,” Andy hesitated.

“Spit it out!”

“I burned my arse sunbathing,” Andy whispered. It cracked me up.

“Considering a hitchhiker’s early retirement, eh? Bollocks! As long as your thumb wiggles we’re hitting the road!” I encouraged him to join.

“Oh, you are the cave people?” a jovial middle-aged woman said and picked us up. She had seen our ire and heard us singing but didn’t dare to interrupt us. We hopped on the back of her pick-up truck.

The woman accelerated and the car was bouncing on the rocky road.

“Cuntbuggerfucktoleybumshite! My arse can’t take this!” Andrew sweared. I first thought he was joking but he asked the woman to stop. She pulled over.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I whispered and looked at Andrew go.

“I’ll walk,” he said in pain and continued: “You go to Switzerland. Go get your holy grail! You don’t need me to slow you down.”

“You’re not kidding,” I sighed. I was already missing the Scottish choob.

“Nice knowing you. See you on the road!” Andrew hollered, thanked the driver and set out on foot.

Finally I ended up in a truck that was going to Portucel paper factory in Setúbal. The driver said that there might be trucks going North. I made a sign with four country codes: E for Spain, F for France, CH for Switzerland and D for Germany. I really didn’t care where I would end up and how long I’d have to wait as long as it was a long-distance ride.

The guards of the paper factory directed me into the drivers’ waiting room. They were dumb-founded that I was ready to wait for the ride for the whole day if that’s what it takes. So what? How long have they waited here? And what are they waiting for; retirement?

I was leafing through my notebook and saw the words of Fritjof Capra: “Our spiritual moments are those moments when we feel most intensely alive.” Lately I had probably felt more alive than these truckers in their life time.

I recalled Jakub, the Polish truck driver who had been gaining experience in The States just to return to Europe to drive a truck. I thought how he’d be growing more and more anxious wasting his days behind the wheel, hoping to use his whole potential and to spend more time with his family.

I thought of Alex, the Romanian fellow who took me to Stuttgart. He had not been home for seven months. The guy is my age and ready to slit his wrists because he’s bossed around from one airport to another.

And now I saw all these truck drivers whose job was basically to wait, drive, take the obligatory breaks, drive more, wait at the border, wait at the factory, wait in the harbor, wait at the airport and drive around without ever really reaching anything. On the outset it might have looked like I was doing exactly the same kind of aimless bouncing around. But the difference was obvious: for me it wasn’t about the destination but the journey.

The road kept me alive. It made me look younger. It kept me in shape. It groomed my patience. It challenged me mentally. It offered serendipitous surprises—new insights, people and events. It made the life worth living.

I should never tell this to truck drivers because for most of them the road was hell and this kind of waiting rooms the purgatory that would eventually burn them alive. I should not tell them that, according to Henry Miller, a man can get to love shit if his happiness depends on it. They didn’t want to hear that the whole transportation system would be automated as soon as the modern technology becomes less expensive than their work—that they were not really needed.

They had fed me, given me cigarettes, and helped me to move from place to place. I was thankful for them but all I could do for them was to tell their story—shout their suffering—to the world and hope it would listen.

I never got the long-distance ride. One truck driver who was going to Vasco da Gama airport near Lisbon
dropped me in a very bad spot, under an overpass on the highway intersection. In no time I flagged down a car. It was a cop car. They informed me that it’s not allowed to hitch on the motorway. Oh really?

After a short negotiation they agreed to pick me up. The cops were enticed by my story and thus really helpful. I talked to them as if they were my old buddies. They felt the need to show off their authority. They put on the sirens, opened the window and motioned other traffic to move aside. I got an express delivery to a gas station.

Their friendly attitude left me with really good vibes. I could feel how my body-mind-spirit thingy was radiating positive energy. Maybe that’s why I got the next ride with ease. The best part: the car had Swiss plates!

They were a lovely Portuguese couple, Mario and Rafaela, who worked in Switzerland and now on vacation at Mario’s parents place in a small village of Santa Maria da Feira. We got along so well that I started secretly hoping that I could go with them all the way to Switzerland. Yeah, right. Keep dreaming, Remmus.

“We’re going to Switzerland day after tomorrow. The car is quite packed but give us a ring,” Rafaela called out and gave me her number before we parted ways. Give us a ring? What did she mean with that?

That night I spent in the apartment of a CouchSurfer called David who, in fact, was in Brazil himself. “There’s an empty flat. Dad will pick you up and let you in,” David answered my emergency couch request. What? Dude has a strong trust in complete strangers.

David’s father took me to a massive three-room apartment and left me there, alone with David’s pet rabbit. It was luxury—especially compared to my original plan of sleeping in the gutter. I laughed to myself that I could eat his rabbit for dinner, steal his laptop, throw the wide-screen TV out of the window and get the hell out.

The trust that I received felt overwhelming. I had set off to my journey with the thought that the world is my oyster that smells rotten. Now the road showed me people who offered me pearl oysters. All these show- ers, beds, warm meals, cigarettes and beers that people offered me were like pearls of compassion and trust.

David had added me as a friend in Facebook so I decided to thank him for all this. It turned out to be a surprisingly good conversation. David was sick and tired of the Portuguese people that complain all the time although they have everything that their cousins in South America are just dreaming of. I told him it’s a pretty universal attitude among well-off people around the globe.

David told me stories of South American nature, girls, parties, culture and the whole nine yards. Travel fever inside of me grew even stronger. I had thought that South America is off limits for me because I didn’t speak proper Spanish. “If you want to go, just go!” David encouraged. Europe felt like a chicken shit on the world map. I had no reason to remain stuck here.

Taking a hot bath was a crown for a successful day. Shampooing my hair I realized I had not washed my hair in more than a week. And my hair wasn’t that dirty. Is it actually the shampoo making hair greasy? I washed my arm pits and realized I had not even used deodorant for quite some time. Do we really need all this hygiene stuff that we take for granted?

I dried myself and stepped on a scale. It showed 73 kg. I had lost six kilos in six weeks. Six weeks… Six kilos… 73 weeks left to live?

I went to see Porto for a day and then borrowed a phone to call Mario and Rafaela. It sounded like such a far-fetched idea to get a ride all the way to Switzerland. I didn’t believe it could happen. But it did!

“We can take you,” Rafaela said. I couldn’t believe my ears. I was invited to spend a night with their family in Santa Maria da Feira.

“Come here for dinner. We leave in the morning!” I heard Mario’s voice from the background. Perfect! Mario and Rafaela showed me to a world that I thought had been long lost; that of true family ties. Their family consisted of parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and pets. That night I was part of their family.

“We are not rich but we like to eat a lot,” Rafaela interpreted what Mario’s father said. Grandma had prepared large trays of potatoes and bachalau—the codfish—garnished in garlic and olive oil. Food was simple but the taste was out of this world! In case someone was left hungry there was also a huge pile of meat available. Dessert was delicious cake with ice cream. And of course there was a variety of drinks: ice tea, juice, soft drinks, beer, Portuguese green wine and sparkling wine.

All in all the dinner took two and half hours. It was filled with joy, chatter, laughter, and caring for everyone around. I was no stranger there. I really felt as part of their family. I looked at the people in awe and sensed the surrounding love. It reminded me of my childhood Christmas gatherings at my grandpa’s place. I had not had this feeling of close-knit family for twenty years.

I wanted them to understand how precious gift the family was. I took some distance and wrote a poem that Rafaela translated in Portuguese. It made everyone cry. I didn’t want them to lose the connection with each other no matter how hard the societal demands tried to erode family ties.

They knew what I was talking about. Some years ago many of the family members had moved abroad to make money, and now what used to be a weekly occasion had reduced to one meeting every summer.

I warned them that in Finland, and most of the Western world, the so-called economic prosperity had gone to the top 5% while the common folk was actually poorer than before, inflation sniggering the purchasing
power of each cent they earn, mortgages and credit card debts pushing them further into the depths of the Rat Race, and everyone left with little or no time for genuine human relationships. People didn't know their neighbors. They lived to work and fortified themselves behind locked doors in the evening. Relatives were either avoided or used as channels to vent frustration.

Individualism was all fine and dandy to some extent, but if it crushed this special bond between people, it had no place in my dictionary. From very early on in the childhood we are conditioned to survive on our own, to make it! We are forced to compete on everything: jobs, education, now even placements in daycare facilities. No wonder the oyster starts to reek.

The constant praise for individualism has not only distanced us from nature but from each other… from humanity for chrissakes! Maybe these times of economic hardship make people realize that in the end they have nothing but each other. Maybe the empty promises decrease people's trust in the system and increases the trust to their fellow man and woman.

The emotional pinnacle was reached next morning. We were all set to leave for Switzerland where I'd soon reunite with V. It was my road to heaven. But before departure we stopped for breakfast at Mario's parents' café.

I sat down next to a woman in pyjamas. I bummed a cigarette from her. Mario brought me an espresso and a sandwich. In other tables people were chatting fervently. They took care of each other's children, and in fact it wasn't obvious whose kids they were in the first place. It looked like one big family, although they probably were just neighbors.

When it was time to bid farewells, women kissed each other on cheeks and men shook hands. It was obvious that these two would be missed. Rafaela cracked in tears, and soon most of the women were sobbing. Men had sullen faces. They bit their lip trying not to reveal the salty liquid. What? Just neighbors?

The road to heaven is paved with tears of loss, suffering of letting go and longing for the loved ones.
I got to Lausanne, Switzerland— one of the financial centers in the world— with just one 2000 km ride. This picturesque city right next to the scenic Lake Geneva was occupied by the cream of capitalistic society. They lived in charming chocolate box houses, decorated with green vines and red flowers. Here they didn’t have to worry about money; but they did. It was the center of their attention. Your net worth equaled to what you were worth. Needless to say I made a move on quite soon.

I was early so, rather than going straight to Basel, I took a detour and met up with Hendrick in Zurich. He had been traveling in South America and his stories just strengthened my decision that one day I’d go there.

I also received a message from Amelia. She had made it home safe and sound. She invited me to Poland. I had told her that I am about to meet up with V and she fully acknowledged the fact that my thoughts are focused on V now. She wanted to hear how I am doing and asked me to write her about my feelings. It felt good to know that she is so supportive and understanding. But I did not reply.

Dark clouds covered the sky over Basel. I tried not to mind the rain showers yet I felt moody and somehow wound up. The closer our reunion with V was the more anxious I grew. Like a proper hitchhiker she was one day late. I had been worrying for V’s safety. It was the first time she hitched alone. The idea of being so close to her yet being unable to hold her close was eating me inside.

We had arranged to meet at the Basel football stadium because our host, Alessandro, was coming to see the game. It was on in less than half an hour. When I reached the stadium the sky cleared of clouds and sun started shining. Everything was falling in place. “I gotta feeling that tonight’s gonna be a good night” the loudspeakers touted just before the game started.

I got my tail up as soon as I saw V walking up the stairs, her blonde curls resting on the shoulders of her bright yellow rain coat. We hugged but she shied away when I approached to kiss her. There was a mental barrier that would have to be crossed before we could start again on a clean slate.

“I had too much time to think when I was hitching here alone,” V said. I didn’t know what it meant but I realized we would have to take it slow. We sat down next to the gate and discussed how the rain had made her progress on the road quite difficult, how a Bosnian driver had offered her to sleep in his truck—which she had politely refused, how she had enjoyed the company of a German band that dropped her to Basel, and how she had fancied the lead guitarist of the band.

“Hey, do you want to see the game?” we were approached by a couple of junior footballers. They gave us two free tickets.

What happened? Perplexed, we entered the stadium. V had never been in a football game before, nor me in such a lovely company. V’s shoes were all wet and she was shivering. I was wearing only a t-shirt because I had thought it would be warm. She leaned on me and soon we were keeping each other warm. Little by little I could sense that she was warming up also emotionally.

“We need to talk,” V whispered in my ear. We were not that interested in the game but we couldn’t really have a thorough discussion either, both because Basel fans were so loud and it wasn’t a time and place to share deep emotions. We were constantly interrupted by an overwhelming roar as the home kept scoring.

There was a Mentos commercial on the giant screen: “There’s nothing like a Mentos kiss”. A camera spotted couples in the audience and expected them to kiss. Get that camera over here! Now! They didn’t spot us but we kissed anyways. It was heavenly to feel her lips after such a long break.

After the game we met with Alessandro and he was astounded that we had got free tickets. “That’s how it works. You love the universe and it will love you back,” I explained with a grin.

Alessandro took us to his place where we got to know his girlfriend Nadine and their cat Olivia. “Make
yourselves at home. The only rule is to keep the bathroom door open. Once in a while Olivia has to take a shit,” Alessandro joked.

Alessandro and Nadine had not spent much time together lately so they went for the cinema and left us alone. It suited us perfectly.

We lazed on the sofa. V rested her legs on my lap and held my hand. I waited her to say something.

“On my way here I realized that I don’t love you. I have never been in love and I’m not in love now,” V noted in a cold manner.

It struck me like a lightning. Excuse me? There she is lying on my lap, stroking my hand and saying something like that? What the hell is she thinking? She saw my weird looks.

“This is just proximity,” she explained.

“Oh okay. Whatever your feelings are, I’d still like to hitch with you,” I uttered almost sobbing. I had been hoping for a bit different reunion. I took my laptop and showed her the poem I had written for her in Zurich:

If you act like a dog that keeps fetching the cane,
You might end up in fog that drives you insane.

When you get to the rainbow there might be no treasure.
You can choose to leave sorrow and create your own pleasure.

If our paths become one I’ll give you my pledge:
That ride will be fun. You’re safe on the edge.

And when there are others you need to feel free,
They can tidy your feathers and make you complete.

I’m not the prince charming; I have no white horse.
But you are my darling. And NOW I’m all yours.

I emphasized the word “now,” trying to message that we should not think about the past or future but live in the moment and see what would happen. She nodded understandingly. Yet she explained that she can’t imagine a future with a moneyless traveler who goes around the world, unable to stick with just one woman.

“I’m not ready for a long-distance relationship,” she said.

Are these really obstacles for love or mere excuses to protect her from disappointments? I couldn’t articulate that thought at all.

“Why would you like me to be broken-hearted?” she asked.

I took in that V had a quite traditional view of what love was supposed to be. All her life she had been looking for that “one and only” that she could have a perfectly normal relationship with. She couldn’t fathom that love could be something deeper, something that unifies people regardless of geographical distances, societal norms or number of people involved.

“V, you are something really special for me,” I tried to reassure.

Maybe you just needed something to look forward to after your trip to Portugal. It could have been any other girl as well,” she noted bluntly. I didn’t want to try and prove her wrong, partly because it was a perspective I had not thought about before and partly because I had no need to be right on this issue.

“I’ll think about it,” I promised.

“Time for shower?” she asked surprisingly and got up from the sofa, still holding my hand.

“Together?” I beamed with excitement.

“Separately,” she concluded torpedoing my intentions. She gave an enticing smile. I saw a promising glimpse in her eye.

When we had both taken a shower she came to kiss me, wearing nothing but her towel.

“Enough discussion for tonight?” I asked and took her to the bedroom. We necked and smooched passionately.

“I appreciate deeds more than words,” she said and pushed me to the bed. Wowza! I stumbled on the bed and lost my towel. “Anyways, 90% of what you say is bullshit,” she added giggling and moved from words to action.

The next shower we took together.

When Alessandro and Nadine came back we opened a bottle of wine, sat in the balcony, smoked cigarillos and got to know each other a little better. They liked us both. We were like old friends although we had just met.

“Now I understand why you traveled 2500 kilometers to meet this woman,” Alessandro said and raised a toast while V and Nadine were getting more wine.

“She’s definitely worth it,” I responded with a smile. That night I felt loved, at all levels, regardless of what had been said.
**I Giraffe U**

**HOW ANYONE CAN SAY THAT she's never been in love?**

When I hear the words "I love you" it makes me smile and my heart is filled with joy. However, due to the ambiguous language we use, the same words might evoke a very different reaction in others: "Oh bloody hell, he probably says that to every girl he meets. What a dishonest prick!" or "Oh my god! He's a freak! He's going to tie me down and feed me to the vampire ducks!" I do need to consider this ambiguity of words, yet, isn't it sad if you meet a person who says that she has never been in love? And isn't it even more sad that you are head over heels for her and she refuses to say she loves you?

V had constantly flirted with me, kissed me, caressed me, fucked me and been so sweet and cuddly next to me—behavior that hints at some sort of affection. But she didn't confess loving me. I wanted to hear those words.

I came up with a ten step list that would make V fall for me.

**How to make a woman say "I love you"?**

1. Take her for a walk and serve her a dinner
2. Travel together
3. Make yourself vulnerable
4. Offer her warmth and proximity
5. Take her to a romantic city
6. Write her a letter
7. Make her feel like a princess
8. Define your relationship
9. Propose to her
10. Get her drunk

When we returned to Alessandro's and Nadine's place I started cooking tuna pasta with some Asian spices, olive oil, herbs and a pile of vampire repellent.

V's shirt was decorated with glitter. She kept coming to the kitchen, hugging me from behind and kissing my neck. It felt nice; as if she was missing me every moment I didn't give her my whole attention. I was covered in glitter.

Good food, good company and good wine were a delicious combination. After dinner V and I retreated to the bedroom and made sweet love for hours. We hoped that the thin walls would be enough to insulate the sounds of our love.
In the morning V complained that her buttocks and legs were sore of hiking.
"Oh, they call it hiking nowadays," Alessandro grinned knowingly.
Damn, Remmus! What a great start!

2. Travel together

Alessandro walked us to the Pratteln gas station where I had already been twice before—first with Sophia and then on my way here. V’s smile guaranteed an easy ride to Lugano. The guys seemed tired so I tried to keep them company. The driver was called Maurizio.
“Where are you coming from?” I asked.
“From Bali,” Maurizio answered.
“Okay, and Lugano… Did you say Bali?” I thought I had misheard him. It turned out that they had just returned from Indonesia and driving from the airport.
“Doesn’t it look eerie here in the Swiss country side?” Maurizio asked.
“Eerie, you say?” I reckoned it was a weird remark. There were lovely meadows, flocks of cows, quaint houses on hill tops, and roads crisscrossing through the forests.
“Can you see any people around?” Maurizio asked.
“Well, now that you mention it.” There were some farms, office buildings, houses and other constructions but no people in sight.
“No one lives here. It’s just a sight made to please tourists,” Maurizio joked.
“Or they only come out at night,” V said.
“Vampires,” I added.
“Or just ordinary possessed Swiss people,” Maurizio remarked. We laughed.
At the next service station there was a bus full of nuns. “It would be so cool to hitch that bus,” V rejoiced.
“So, let’s hitch,” I blurted and went to greet the Sisters before V could stop me. “Excuse me, are you going towards Milano?” I asked one of them.
“Yes. Why do you ask?” Sister wondered. She clearly has not hitched before.
“Could we go with you?” I pointed at V who was waiting in the distance.
“Oh, golly, I’m afraid our bus is full” Sister answered politely.
“Let’s make some space. You know, the Swiss are possessed. You could go and do some exorcism in the meantime… Holy shit! I mean… Did I just say that?”
Sister moved away. She soon looked preoccupied with her nun stuff.

3. Make yourself vulnerable

We got the following few rides so easily that we started doubting the reputation of Italy as a hitchhiker’s hell. We ended up in Desenzano del Garda—a small town next to the clear-watered Lake Garda.
I went to take a leak in a crowded bar. After zipping up my jeans I pulled a string that I assumed to flush the toilet. Bleep, bleep, bleep, bleep! Annoying siren sound started wailing and red light blinking. What the hell? It had been an alarm to call for help. How do I turn that off? I was trying to find a switch, in vain. What string do I have to pull to get help to stop this?
Bloody hell! I cannot even flush a toilet without creating a scene. Embarrassed I escaped through the crowd and hoped no one would realize it was me who was behind the beeping and red blinking lights.
“We need to go.” I told V and grabbed her arm. She laughed her ass off when she heard what had happened.

4. Offer her warmth and proximity

I fetched a free honey melon and grapes for breakfast from a fruit store. V got ready to sleep outside and collected cardboard from the bins. They’d serve as a mattress. “You know, you’d make a really good homeless person,” I joked.
We ended up on a camping site next to the shore. I told my story in the reception and after some bewilderment they let us camp at their lawn for free. We arranged a couple of recliners under a tree and V spread the pieces of cardboard on them.
The sky was clear and lit with stars. The lake was majestically beautiful. A couple of swans swam in the shore. V and Remmus were horny.
We went to the shower together. It took quite a while as we were still trying to figure out the nuts and bolts of having sex in an Italian campsite shower that seemed to have its own mind. It was like pre-programmed to annoy horny couples. First it splashed burning water on us. We almost jumped through the wall. Finally the water reached a tolerable temperature and we started kissing, both of us full of lust. Then the trickster shower washed away my boner with a sudden splash of cold water. Luckily V knew how to warm up a guy.
Warmth was needed during the night as well. We had not taken into account the freezing wind blowing straight from The Alps and, whimsical as she was, V had demanded that we sleep separately. I woke up and noticed that V is re-arranging the recliners to build walls and patching them with pieces of cardboard, rain coats and everything imaginable to block the wind. “Keep me warm!” she requested and tucked in next to me.

In the morning I thought V would say “You fucker; you tried to freeze me to death!” Instead she said: “If we ever sleep outside again we’ll be next to each other”. Excellent! It worked!

5. Take her to a romantic city

Next day we went to Verona—the city of Romeo and Juliet. V just wanted to see the famous Juliet’s balcony. We walked hand in hand among the flocks of tourists and enjoyed the sunny day together. “Isn’t it a romantic city?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. It’s nice,” V said.

“You’d prefer Venice, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” V agreed flashing her eyes like a begging puppy.

“Let’s go,” I said and we ran to the road.

We got a ride from almost a hundred year-old guy called Giancomo. He was something else. He clearly had a crush on V and started flirting in Italian.

I thought the grandpa would drive slowly but no! Giancomo would go 130 km/h in the middle of the highway, speaking in his cell phone at times, occasionally leaning on the wheel and watching the skies, blabbering with V without paying any attention to the road and veering from lane to lane carelessly, all the time with the blinker on. “We are alive!” we both cheered when we got to Venice.

Giancomo reminded me of my grandma who had been here in the eighties—according to her own demented words—“getting a ride on a condom” . I hoped she had referred to the gondolas.

CouchSurfing in Venice was next to impossible because the 300 CouchSurfers received so many requests. Instead V took me to a lovely Venice Fish hostel that was ran almost entirely by volunteers. We got creamy Italian pasta with meatballs for dinner and hand-washed our laundry before going out to see the city.

We strolled around and enjoyed the romantic atmosphere of Venice. We ended up on a pier to watch the stars. An outdoor concert nearby, organized by the Communist Party, served as the background music.

I told V how great time I had, traveling with her, having meaningful discussions and getting to know her better. “You haven’t seen the real picture of me because there is none of that ordinary stuff that I have in Riga,” she replied.

“No, I think I have seen the real you. Work and other stuff that you have back home is artificial nonsense that keeps bothering you and veils who you really are,” I answered. I think V agreed at least partly. She didn’t say anything but kissed me softly.

On our way back to the hostel I thought about what she had said in Basel about me being with her just to have something to look forward to after the Hitchgathering. Bullshit! I was madly in love with her.

“I’m pretty much ready to go to your papa and ask him for his daughter’s hand,” I said half-jokingly.

“He would never agree to that because for him the job defines who you are. He wouldn’t approve you because you don’t use money,” she said and let me down. Oh, how nice. Must be a great lad.

“And quite frankly, you’re not really ideal husband material, Remmus. Having a family with you would be just impossible!” she voiced her concerns. To top it off she added that our star signs didn’t match.

I was perplexed. Why is she coming up with all these excuses? She behaves so differently. She is constantly kissing me, hugging me, caressing me, and flashing her bedroom eyes to me. Her behavior makes my knees tremble. And then she blabbers repeatedly that she’s not in love with me.

Maybe V just doesn’t know what the word “love” means to her.

I asked her to forget about social norms and ready-made answers, to define what love means for her. “You don’t have to be broken-hearted because of love.” I referred back to what she had said before.

“You just want to prove your point,” she shrugged.

I didn’t have a need to be right on this one. I didn’t want to push her to polyamory. I just wanted her to do some introspection and understand love on a deeper level. “If you don’t like using the word ‘love’, use something else. I don’t care if you call it a giraffe or something.” I tried to lighten up the conversation. She smiled.

When I fell asleep that night, I was emotionally wrecked. Why can’t she just giraffe me?

6. Write her a letter

We woke up from separate beds. My head was a mess. I wrote her a letter:

_I want to know what you really feel for me._
_We’ve had amazing time together—we are holding hands where ever we go, the sex is_
unbelievable, we have both a lot of fun and deeply philosophical discussions, we support each other constantly, and we help each other to learn about our relationship, ourselves and life in general. What more could one ask?

What I decipher from your behavior is so much better than what you say. Tell me what you want of me! Am I anything else than a mere travel buddy for you?

When she read the letter she'd burst in tears. I hugged her.

“I feel physically attracted to you,” V sputtered.

“So, I’m merely your toy-boy” I asked.

“No, there are feelings that go deeper than that,” V cried.

Is that V’s way to say “I love you”? It made my anxiety disappear. I felt loved—whether she wanted to use that word or not.

7. Make her feel like a princess

After a romantic day in Venice we hitched to Trieste. Again, we had no idea where to spend the night. But first, we needed something to eat. We stopped at the terrace of a large restaurant where a joyous waitress greeted us. I told her my story—that I had been on the road for a couple of months completely without money—and asked if they happened to have leftovers.

We didn’t get leftovers.

Instead we received a big tin foil box full of fries, prosciutto ham, spinach rice and delicious German style sausages. We climbed up the hill to a wonderfully lit park, next to a castle, and had a mouth-watering dinner. We enjoyed every bit of it.

“Hey, the castle is still open,” V noticed. It was nearly 11 pm but the humongous door of San Giusto castle was ajar. We tiptoed inside. There were only two other people walking on the walls and even they were on their way out.

Bam, bam, bam! Like ordered, the fireworks shot up to the sky. Thank you filthy rich bastards for this moment! I gave V a dark red rose that I had picked from the bush on our way. She kissed me tenderly and leaned her head on my shoulder.

“You know, we could even spend the night here,” I suggested.

“Yeah, right,” she didn’t take me seriously before she noticed my expectant expression. “Here? In the castle?”

“Yes, here. Let’s find a nice spot and hide here for the night,” I explained.

“You’re absolutely crazy!”

“That’s the way you like me, right?” I grinned.

We found a good spot on top of the walls. It was nicely hidden if someone happened to pass by. The fireworks reached a magnificent pinnacle and the sky calmed down to a vast kingdom of stars once again.

We woke up with the first rays of sun.

“Perfect!” V said and gave a peck on my cheek. Yes, it is.

“Though it’s a bit odd that no one came to kick us out,” I wondered.

Soon we got up and realized that we are still the only people around.

“By the way, it’s Sunday,” V noted.

“Give me a break. They wouldn’t…”

We galloped down the stairs, through the yard and to the main door.

“Locked,” V said holding the handle.

“Great! But there has to be an emergency exit,” I thought out loud.

We toured the whole place and tried every door. Locked. All of them locked? Can’t even take a leak in the toilet.

“How much water do we have left?” V finally asked.

“Half a bottle. How come?”

“They probably open tomorrow morning. I guess we’re going to be alright,” she smiled and sat down in the sun next to the tower. I sat next to her and pondered how we might spend the day in a castle. By now we had probably showed our faces to every surveillance camera out there. I looked directly at one of them and waved. I hoped that some poor bugger at the security firm would see us, choke on his morning coffee and come open the door.

Wait a minute! I rushed back to the door. There was a gigantic latch that could be pulled down. I tried. The heavy door opened! I realized there’s no way to close it from outside.

“Let’s run!” I suggested.
8. Define your relationship

We crisscrossed from Trieste to Split in Croatia. I was obsessed to take her to the disgustingly romantic island of Brac where I had once been alone. V hitched us a 300-km ride in a car that was already packed. The driver didn't mind extra passengers. V didn't mind sitting on my lap. And I didn't mind being so close to her.

We ended up spending a night in a lodge that belonged to a British couple that I knew from before. Eddie and Sandra were surprised to see me standing, uninvited, on their front porch. "Come in!" they said delighted and arranged us a room. We spent the night playing Hearts with them, drinking beer and eating Sandra's cevapcici—meat fingers served with raw onion and ajvar paprika sauce, a typical dish in the Balkan countries. Eddie even gave us a present: a bottle of super strong home-made wine.

When Eddie and Sandra went to bed we stayed out with V. I had drawn letters "I" and "U" on a beer coaster and between them a picture of a giraffe. I gave it to V.

"I llama you?" she played stupid.

"I giraffe you!" I exclaimed and kissed V.

"Me too. Whatever it means," she smiled.

Really? We took a quick shower and moved to the bed, and to the floor, and on the table, and...

9. Propose to her

Next day we spent sun bathing on the beach. V got fed up with my obsession when I was thinking out loud the possible boat hitching tactics to Brac.

"What's so special about the islands anyways? Any place can be romantic. I'm getting tired of hitching all the time," V snapped. My sore feet started to agree with her. I looked at her sexy body glimmering of sweat. What's the point of reaching for the stars if all you need is right in front of you?

We ended up hitching 20 kilometers South to a small town of Omiš. On our way we picked delicious peaches and grapes from the trees by the side of the road. It reminded me of Portugal—and of Amelia. Don't worry, 'bout a thing, 'cos every little thing, is gonna be alright… I hummed to myself and enjoyed the afternoon sun.

Magnificent mountains embraced a breath-taking canyon and a river that drifted right through Omiš into the sea. Brac island was visible at the sea. V had been right. here was no need to go to the island. It was romantic here as well.

Whilst V went to buy ice cream I returned to a stall where I had seen a glimpse of rings. Should I propose to her? the sales woman looked at me expectantly.

"Excuse me. This might sound a bit odd, but—how would I put it—I don't use money but I was thinking of proposing to my girlfriend… or she's… Do you have a ring that I could have for free?" the words hardly came out. I had never bummed an engagement ring before.

"I'm just working here. I'm under constant supervision," the woman explained.

"I understand. Maybe it was a bit far-fetched," I said disappointed.

"Wait a moment," the sales woman went inside the stall for a while. Soon she came back and slipped something in my pocket with a cautious smile. I put my hand in the pocket. It's a ring! Damn, it worked!

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I whispered to the shopliter sales woman and let back to V.

"Where were you?" V was waiting for me with two cones of ice cream.

"Pistachio! You remembered my favorite," I changed the topic quickly.

Soon we were in the marina watching the sea that glimmered in the sun set. I hesitated for a while. I had no idea how to propose to her because even I didn't really know what it meant in my case. I didn't want to get married in a traditional sense but I wanted to let her know how much I loved her. If not now, then when? I took out the ring. Oh, bloody hell, it's big! I kneel down.

"Remmus, what are you doing?" V shrieked when she saw the lump of metal with embedded stones.

"Do you Viktoria take me to be with you as long as it feels good?" I offered her the ring. It was too big and could only fit the middle finger.

"Where did you get this?" she laughed at the somewhat ugly ring.

"I'm sorry. That's the best I could do in five minutes and with zero Euro," I tried to save my face. She probably thought it's a nice gesture but couldn't take it seriously. She showed me the middle finger, or the ring in it.

"Don't you remember what I said in Venice?" she asked.

"Yeah, yeah… whatever. I remember your excuses. Forget about it," I wrote it off with a shrug. I was ready to spend the rest of my life with her but she still didn't feel the same way for me.

10. Get her drunk

Day 9 with V coming up. Nine steps behind. One more chance:
1. Take her for a walk and serve her a dinner
2. Travel together
3. Make yourself vulnerable
4. Offer her warmth and proximity
5. Take her to a romantic city.
6. Write her a letter
7. Make her feel like a princess
8. Define your relationship
9. Propose to her
10. Get her drunk

In the marina there was a filthy expensive motor boat and its captain on board. We talked to him and joked whether he takes boat hitchhikers. “Why not! Get on board!” he said. What? Really?

Indeed, we got our first boat hitching experience—not on the yacht, not to Brac, but 300 meters on a tiny jar to a small beach where we’d be hidden from the curious passers-by. We used hay and our sleeping bags to soften the rocky surface and opened the bottle of wine that we had got from Eddie. It was too warm, too strong and too sweet. Perfect!

The view was unspeakably beautiful: the mountainous slopes connected with the stars above and the waves gently caressed the shore. It was just 8:30 pm but pitch black. It served as a reminder that although the temperature was still good +25 degrees Celsius, it was turning to fall already. Soon V would have to go back North and I’d continue following the sun.

Maybe V was also reminded of the fact that we would soon part ways—or maybe it was due to Eddie’s wine—because she was suddenly all over me, naked and ripping my clothes off. Making love under the depths of the night sky was amazing. The energy of the universe joined the union between a man and a woman. It brought together the two polarities that longed for the eternal connection.

Fuck giraffe! This is love! I felt pure love, not only to V, but towards nature and the universe. I felt I was one, not only with V, but with the whole consciousness surrounding us.

Our love-making continued for what felt like eternity until we reached a wild, simultaneous, loud orgasm. Gaping for air we laid down next to each other. Holding her tight I saw two shooting stars and, accordingly, made two wishes.

My first wish was that there would be no mosquitoes at night. The second wish was that more people could get in touch with this beauty of nature, understand life in all its simplicity and fathom the true perfection of the creator—the God, the universe—that is just waiting for us to connect with it and become one with it.

There were no mosquitoes that night.

In the morning we opened her eyes and noticed me staring at her just a few centimeters away. “What?” she managed to utter.

“Good morning love!”
“Morning, you…” V answered with a yawn.
“Last night was something larger than life, wasn’t it?”
“I was so fucking hammered. But yeah, it was fun,” V admitted.
“Do you remember when you said that 90 per cent of what I say is bullshit?”
“So?” V rubbed her eyes and sat up.
“Do you feel that my love for you is genuine or just faking?” I asked.

“Faking,” she answered cynically. It was not the response I had hoped for. I thought that my deeds had made her feeling loved. I couldn't help but shedding a tear.

“I just don’t want you to treat this as a sheer two-week vacation. You don’t have to be broken-hearted when we're in separate places. You can enjoy life and other people as much as you want. V, give us a chance.”
“You have changed something in my thinking,” V managed to say.

“I see life a bit differently now. Maybe I’ll quit my job and join you,” V said. My heart missed a beat. I was overjoyed. When V saw my face she hurried to add: “You do understand that I’m joking, don’t you?”

“I don’t,” I was confused.

“Remmus, I will miss you but I don’t love you. Let’s hitch to Zagreb today. I’m leaving tomorrow,” V said cold-heartedly.

Fucking hell, did she just dump me? Bitch!!
PART 3: FALL

It’s more important to be free than to be happy.
Sissy Hankshaw
Recalibration

In Zagreb. Alone. Amelia is online. I opened the chat window:

R: Hey, Amelia! How’s it going?
A: Hi, love! I just decorated my wall with hitchhiking photos. You’re in quite a few of them. Where are you? Is it still summer?
R: In Zagreb. It’s raining cats and dogs. Gray and gloomy.
A: Oh no. Did you hear what happened to the squat in Barcelona?
R: No, what?
A: The city had bulldozed it to the ground without a warning! People hardly had time to escape. They took it down so quickly.
R: Can’t be! Bastards!
A: Say that again. I was so pissed off! What to do? Old world VS the new world. By the way, it has been quite difficult to adjust back to this environment. I think I’ve changed so much that this place feels uninspiring.
R: What have you figured out?
A: Volleyball takes too much time. I love it but this has to be the last season. I want to travel (maybe with you?) more and see the world.
R: Great! How’s your relationship?
A: It’s over.
R: Oh no. Or… congratulations?
A: We had a five-hour discussion and came to same conclusions: there’s no point to stay together because we want so different things out of life. We split up, spooned and fell asleep. :)
R: Lovely break-up. V and I were not that successful.
A: Oh, what happened? Did she leave already?
R: Yep, a bit early. I just walked her to the bus stop. She was quite tense but kissed me goodbye anyhow.
Let’s see if we ever meet again.
A: No way! I thought you had real good time together. What happened?
R: Uh, long story. It was fun. Let’s just say that she was unable to cope with my principles after all. And I wasn’t ready to compromise, stubborn as I am.
A: Oh my. How do you feel now?
R: I feel like shit. Empty. My whole body screams in pain but I’m unable to cry.
A: I wish I was there to console.
R: Thanks! You did already. I was about to pack my stuff and run after her.
A: Why didn’t you?
R: Gotta follow the dreams. Four more continents to see… My ex is shouting something in the other window. I’ll chat with her for a while. Ciao! Thanks for pepping me up!
A: Say that again. I was so pissed off! What to do? Old world VS the new world. By the way, it has been quite difficult to adjust back to this environment. I think I’ve changed so much that this place feels uninspiring.
R: What have you figured out?
A: Volleyball takes too much time. I love it but this has to be the last season. I want to travel (maybe with you?) more and see the world.
R: Great! How’s your relationship?
A: It’s over.
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A: We had a five-hour discussion and came to same conclusions: there’s no point to stay together because we want so different things out of life. We split up, spooned and fell asleep. :)
R: Lovely break-up. V and I were not that successful.
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Let’s see if we ever meet again.
A: No way! I thought you had real good time together. What happened?
R: Uh, long story. It was fun. Let’s just say that she was unable to cope with my principles after all. And I wasn’t ready to compromise, stubborn as I am.
A: Oh my. How do you feel now?
R: I feel like shit. Empty. My whole body screams in pain but I’m unable to cry.
A: I wish I was there to console.
R: Thanks! You did already. I was about to pack my stuff and run after her.
A: Why didn’t you?
R: Gotta follow the dreams. Four more continents to see… My ex is shouting something in the other window. I’ll chat with her for a while. Ciao! Thanks for pepping me up!
A: Don’t worry! Everything happens for a reason. Come to Poland when you have time!
My ex was positively surprised that I had become a free writer-hitchhiker. She had a husband and two babies. We both had got what we had hoped for, she had a family and I had my freedom. I just didn’t know what to do with that freedom right now. I remembered the words of Sissy Hankshaw: “There’s just one thing in this life that’s better than happiness and that’s freedom.”

What am I free of? Or what am I free to do? I have freedom to love. I don’t have to limit my love to any one person or thing, I am free of worry when it comes to money, I can’t run out of money when I’m already broke. I am free to grow as a person. I’m free from possessions and property that limits people’s freedom to move.

But are these really the kind of freedoms that I really need?

A third chat-window opened. My compass was recalibrated in one swoop as my Serbian friend Miloš invited me to their farm in Kosovo. I had not seen the bugger in three years. Now I had a reason to pack my bag and move on.

It all happened so quickly. After a quick stopover in Belgrade I was on my way to Kosovo. The truck was
loaded with ten passenger cars and crawled 70 km/h up and down the hill roads. Late at night I met Miloš who came to pick me up from the outskirts of Vranje, closest city on the Serbian side.

Just a few years ago they had still waged war in Kosovo. Albanians were the majority and Serbs now the oppressed minority. Whether the motive was the lofty gold reserves in Kosovo or merely strengthening the geopolitical status of USA and UK, the NATO troops had wreaked havoc with their bombers.

The village of Korminjane where Miloš lived was left largely untouched. All the same, the two hundred villagers were now pretty much trapped in their own homes. Serbia was the only country where they could travel to with ease, and in Kosovo they could only stay in the designated areas—Serbian enclaves—unless they wanted to get into trouble with the Albanian police forces and angry civilians who might beat them up just because they were Serbs.

Being trapped like this ensured that the favorite pastime here was drinking and smoking. Some young people, like Miloš, tried to study but it was pointless. It would be very hard, if not impossible, for them to get a job in Kosovo. Thus they ended up spending their parents’ pension money on cigarettes, alcohol and weed.

Not that I had anything to complain. Miloš and his friends were really welcoming although Miloš was the only person I could have a conversation with in English. I even got invited to shoot with an AK-47 in the forest. According to Miloš 95% of the people there had one—remnants from the war times.

His mother made sure that I get some meat around my bones and served me with excellent food all the time. The most common food staples were bread, cheese, tomatoes and peppers—everything 100% organic and home-made. Once a day we’d have a warm meal with meat, beans, potatoes, eggs and the like. Everything was delicious—far from the tasteless standardized industrial crap that is sold in all European supermarkets.

“Time” was a meaningless concept in Korminjane. There was absolutely no stress about anything. No one cared about how they looked like. Domestic animals prowled on the yards. Everyone kept smiling. Fruit and vegetables were ample and there for picking for anyone. Villagers greeted each others on the streets. You could pop by to anyone’s house at anytime uninvited and at least a couple of shots of Rakia were guaranteed. Rakia is a common home-made spirits in all Balkan countries. It is made of plums and has about 50 per cent alcohol. It came in handy because soon my heart was broken.

I had written V “I miss you” messages nearly every day and asked about her true feelings. The response was icy: “First I tried to deny all feelings… then it was giraffe… then maybe even more… but… I have decided to move on.”

I finally managed to cry. Now I knew that she doesn’t want to have a relationship with me although it was evident that the feelings had been mutual. I could not fathom why she acted this way. She had shown me the way to heaven and asked not to come back.

What a load of bollocks! I had decided to follow this path, stay true to myself, and I was to bear the consequences. I had chosen not to be the victim in the story of life. Instead I wanted to be the hero: to shape people’s perceptions on what is real and what is mere social conditioning. My ego took over: I knew how to be compatible with the society but the society was not yet Remmus-compatible.

“Some people have to do the pioneer work, and that work is not always easy,” my first poly-girlfriend had said. She had shown me what boundless and limitless love is all about. The short relationship with her had taught me what jealousy meant for me; in my case it spawned from the fear of being rejected and left out—that in turn clearly had something to do with my parents’ divorce.

And now I was in that situation again: left out, alone and crying. But instead of attacking V with insults I decided to give her time. If we were meant to be together it would happen sooner or later. I should not burden myself with thoughts of what could have been if I had forced myself to follow her, rejected my other dreams and compromised who I really was. I couldn’t deny myself the possibility to be with other people, Amelia for instance.

I started to have a little bit too much fun in Kosovo. One day we went “fishing” with the blokes—i.e. to drink beer and smoke weed by a shitty stream. From there we went to a local “night club” called Happy Hour. It was a real happy hour to see a local bar ight: some twenty people were hitting and kicking each other. Bottles were lying in the air, and people were running out to get their blood-gushing heads stitched.

Somehow I managed to stay out of trouble; I was too busy emptying the half-full pints that people let at the tables. Good deed of the day. More for them to throw.

“It’s dangerous here. Let’s go out!” someone screamed and escorted me out. Yeah, right. That’s what they keep saying. Dangerous. Fucking mass-media brainwashed kids.

The fight continued outside. I put my thumb up and hitched away. I have no recollection who picked me up but they ensured that the incessant drinking wouldn’t stop. Luckily everyone knew who my host was. I woke up at Miloš’s place, after 14 hours of sleeping. I was still drunk.

“Would you like some milk?” his mum asked.

“Or rakia?” Miloš grinned.

No fucking way. I have to leave. Otherwise I’ll hook up with some underage local girl, get married, shoot around with AK-47 and stay here for the rest of my life. Besides, it’s getting cold here.
Revolution of the Mind

A Greek writer and couchsurfer Chara invited me to her place in Thessaloniki and saved me from becoming an alcoholic in Kosovo.

Greece was on the verge of a revolution. General strikes and riots on the streets were just prelude to what was yet to come. The city of Thessaloniki was full of squats and the anarchist movement was going strong. They were backed by the public opinion ever since the police had shot an innocent 16-year-old boy. There were stickers everywhere that said: “Watch out for accidental firing; Greek police around”.

But it was not up to the young anarchists to make the real revolution happen. The dormant middle class had to wake up. Otherwise the whole concept of middle class would be wiped away, leaving nothing but the elite and the poor.

Wages had been cut by 12.5% and new taxes were imposed on them but people just swallowed the bitter taste of new reality. Once again the orchestrated economic hardship pushed people to survive with less while the assets moved to the upper class. The poor were forced to sell their labor cheaper and cheaper.

This had been the case in every recession. Only now it was truly a global phenomenon. Private banks ruled everything. They bought politicians to pass favorable policies. Businesses, governments and individuals alike were indebted to them.

IMF and World Bank were called to rescue once the countries had been pushed into deep enough shit. In reality that had been the plan from the very beginning: to push the countries in misery so that the aforementioned institutions could come and dictate the terms. Thus the powers that be could privatize everything and keep the people in control.

In Bolivia it had meant privatization of all water—including rainwater. Jamaica had been forced to open its borders for “free trade”—i.e. to enslave the locals to sweatshops and to import subsidized American and European agriculture products that kill the local agriculture. Same had happened in Africa; the people were starving as the local produce was exported and few farms could compete with the subsidized imports.

In Romania Bechtel was supposed to be building the most expensive motorways in Europe, with the IMF loaned money. And now Greece was pushed against the wall. Goldman Sachs had helped Greece to European Union with “creative accounting”—40 billion Euros of debt were momentarily swept under the rug—and now the same bank was demanding a pay back, with interest. Other EU countries were called to “help Greece” although the real beneficiary was the bank.

Like Greeks themselves, the Finns were furious at the Greek government, without realizing who really profits from this arrangement. In Finland the state-owned enterprises had been largely privatized already and next in line would be the natural resources, such as ground water. Today’s oppressors and conquistadors didn’t lurk behind the Russian border. They lurked behind closed doors in cabinets and ruthlessly peed in the morning cereal of honest Finnish kids.

But my reason to be in Greece was not the revolution. I had come here to help one person, Chara. She introduced me to her film project, an unfinished script that had caused her gray hair for years.

She wanted to make a film that would prove that even the most callous fools—herself included—can change their life and get things right, even if they were past 30 years of age. According to her people who pass the magical 30 are not willing to give up what they have achieved—friendships, family ties, occupation, habits etc.—even if they’d hate some of those things that are holding them back.

This was exactly the same block that was preventing the whole society to take a step forward: although all the world’s people would benefit from a society where no one needs to work for survival and where everything is shared freely, no real change was possible as long as people hold on to their indoctrinated thinking that they need to be slaves to the system and have money to buy food.
Many people understood in theory what I was talking about but they could not get their head around the fact that they could disregard the dinosaur institutions and be free today. The fear of the unknown was holding them back.

After a few hours of discussion the key message of Chara’s film crystallized: “If you want something to happen do it, even if you were so scared that you’d shit your pants!” And that applied to Chara as well. I was ready to help her if needed—not to wipe, but to bring more toilet paper, so to speak.

Chara would have let me be at their place as long as I wanted: we had a lot to discuss, her brother treated me like an old friend and my presence didn’t seem to bother their widowed mother either. Andrew told me that he might be coming to Greece in about one month’s time. But I had no time to wait. The road was calling.

I tried to talk my Turkish hitchhiker friend Emel into hitching with me around Turkey. She declined the offer. Emel told me that Turkish drivers are just crazy; that people get killed and raped on the road—that even long-haired guys would be good enough prey for them. I refused to believe that. I knew that most of the stories were just urban legends based on unfounded fears. I was disappointed that fear was still controlling her life. Nonetheless, I decided to embark on Tour de Turkey, alone.

Chara gave me food, bus tickets out of town, a packet of cigarettes and even a deodorant. The biggest surprise, however, what she pulled out from the drawer under her bed.

The zipper in my rucksack had been broken for quite a while. Two safety pins held it together. Closing it took about 15 minutes and a pinch of patience. I had been fantasizing of a perfect backpack. It should be mid-sized—about 40-60 liters—just enough to put all of my stuff in, with a lot of pockets for markers, soap, Swiss knife, notebook, pens, comb, razors, water bottles and other traveler’s paraphernalia, and of course straps that would make it easier to carry.

And what does Chara offer me? A backpack, exactly the kind I’ve imagined!

“Are you saying you don’t use that?” I asked hopefully.

“I use it once or twice a year while camping,” Chara pondered and looked like she wasn’t hundred per cent sure if she wants to let go of it.

“Thanks but I don’t want to take your only backpack,” I declined.

“No, I cannot,” I refused.

“Take!”

“No.”

“Fine. How about this one?” Chara showed a sports bag that was large enough for my stuff but probably uncomfortable to carry. “And this would be good for a writer,” she gave me a black laptop bag.

“Thank you so much!” I accepted the gifts and packed my stuff in them. The sports bag felt quite heavy but I thought I’d get accustomed to it. I was happy the zipper problems were history.

As soon as I got out of Thessaloniki I was cursing my stupid mistake. Who in their right mind would carry a sports bag on the road? Remmus, you idiot! The bag was making my back hurt after just a few hundred meters of walking. I kept changing it from side to side but it didn’t help. The weight was out of balance and the strap made my shoulders ache.

I wonder what the universe thinks now that I refused the gift? Oh yeah, dummy, I am part of the universe. I caught myself thinking like religious folks who view God as somehow external to them.

The Law of Attraction—a concept popularized by the book and movie The Secret—really worked. I wouldn’t recommend The Secret to anyone as it’s mainly the usual American “how to become rich and get more possessions” mumbo-jumbo but the law of attraction is a flawless concept. If you really want to achieve something and you keep visualizing it you will eventually get it.

For me it was not a matter of belief. I had accumulated plenty of evidence. The very fact that I was still alive was proof that my motto was spot on: “Love the universe and it will love you back”. As long as I wasn’t craving obsessively I got whatever I wanted from the universe. The less I was content with the easier it was to get.

These wishes were like prayers to the higher Self. The visualization sent information to my environment—universe, that I’m part of—and it pushed me towards fulfilling the wish knowingly or unconsciously. Simultaneously other people—who are also part of the universe—knew exactly what to offer me. They had received my electrical signal.

Maybe the societal revolution that Greece and the rest of the world needs will be an effect of a much larger cataclysm—revolution of the mind.

The head of Remmus was already at the barricades and Molotov cocktails were swooshing by. I was missing V. Universe, if you can hear me, thanks for the backpack. Send over one piece of Viktoria, pretty please!

I sat in a Turkish truck and noticed how Emel’s warnings had remained haunting at the back of my head. The driver had just sprayed some perfume on me. I thought he wanted me to be his whore. When nothing happened after all I thought it must have been just a polite Turkish gesture to make the guest feel welcome. Or maybe I just smelled hideous.

We got stuck in the Greek customs for hours. The police and border control officials inspected the passenger
cars carefully. They stopped the cars at random, examined under the hood with a flashlight, checked the trunk and made the drivers wait unnecessarily long. They also kept the truck drivers waiting just to fuck with them. It was as if they needed some activity to justify their employment. How can a uniform make someone behave like that? And how people without that garment are willingly taking this bullshit? Fear. It was still controlling us.

When we finally made it to the Turkish side fear was creeping down my spine as well. "Are you a CouchSurfer?" the customs official asked surprisingly. What? Is it illegal here? I gave him my passport. He stared at me behind the glass. Why is he asking? How can he even know CouchSurfing?

"Do you have a host in Istanbul?" he inquired. What am I supposed to answer? Is it an entry requirement to have a host or what? Why he's assuming that I'm going to Istanbul? I'm going where the road takes me.

"No, I don't," I answered honestly.

"If you haven't found a host by tomorrow…" What kind of threats he's going to pass at me? "…then contact me," he said and slipped a piece of paper between my passport. Contact him? Why? What does it say here? Couchsurfing.org/people/…

"Are you saying you're in CouchSurfing as well?" I asked in surprise.

"Yep. It might be difficult to find a couch in Istanbul. Pretty popular place," he replied with a smile. Tension relieved. I burst into laughter and we shook hands like old buddies.

I don't know if I'm even going to Istanbul. Thanks anyways! It was the first time I get asked this kind of questions on the border, I said joyously and returned to the truck. He wished bon voyage. A giant red flag fluttered in the wind and welcomed me to Turkey.

Shortly, the driver stopped. Due to the language barrier I couldn't ask why. Soon another guy appeared with a pick-up. The driver explained something in a vehement manner and went out. Together the guys started filling canisters and taking them to the back of the pick-up. Damn, they're stealing petrol from the company truck! Time passed. This might take a while.

I jumped out with my stuff, thanked for the ride and tiptoed to the road. The driver was too excited to notice. Quite dishonest… But I guess it's understandable when he's trying to get by and feed his family with a shit of a salary.

Although it was dark already I managed to get a ride easily. A car stopped as soon as I raised my hand. The driver was an older gentleman who, of course, didn't speak a word of English. "That way," I motioned forward. We drove in silence for about twenty kilometers. Then he stopped. For a while I didn't understand why.

Oh, he's taking a leak. I followed his example and emptied my bladder by the side of the road. Maybe due to Emel's warnings a silly thought occurred: here I am at dark murky road, with an unknown guy, my penis hanging out. I hated myself for even thinking that something bad might happen. But my worries were not unfounded.

Back in the car he suddenly asked something in Turkish. I didn't get it. Then he showed with his fingers, as if they were scissors. I still didn't comprehend what he's trying to say. He slowed down and did the same scissor imitation on his crotch. Now I understood that he's asking if I was circumcised. What the hell that has to do with anything? "No. Just drive!" I motioned forward and sighed. He didn't say another word. Don't do anything stupid; if you do I might have to hurt you. I don't want to do that. An agonizing fifteen minutes followed. Just don't take out scissors…

Finally he just dropped me off at a truck park and sped off. I was relieved to get out of the car—relieved but confused. Was that the only thing he wanted to know about me: if my foreskin was snipped off or not?

I felt tired. I glanced at the parked trucks. Should I continue hitchhiking? Most of them seem to be asleep. I guess I'll do the same. I walked to the forest to find a suitable place to rest. I stumbled among the trees and cursed myself that I didn't have a flashlight.

Suddenly there was rumble in the bushes and something darted straight at me. "Eeeek!" small hysterical girl screamed as she bumped into me. She was shocked in tears. She's tiny but seems to be an adult. Blonde. Not local.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She wailed something. I couldn't pick the language. Gibberish… "Do you speak English? My name is Remmus. I'm a hitchhiker from Finland," I said while grabbing her by the shoulders to calm her down.

"Oh, hitchhiker? Me too. A crazy truck driver tried to touch me. 'No sex, no Istanbul' he said and I ran! Sorry if I scared you. I'm Viktoria from Lithuania," she introduced herself.

Viktoria? You got to be kidding me!
we spent the night in Viktoria's tent. She needed someone to keep her safe.

Viktoria was a small beautiful girl who looked really young—although she was 24 already—and somehow eccentric, in a nice hippie kind of way. I was impressed that she had guts to hitch alone. Then again, it was already the end of September. The amateurs were no longer on the road. Kids longing for adventure were back at school and only the hard core hitchhikers and most pathetic sociopaths continued hitching. I didn't know anymore which category I belonged to.

In the morning we hitched together towards Istanbul. We had time to get to know each other better. Viktoria was on a serious look-out for her passion in life; something she could do to help others. She was into yoga, meditation and Buddhism. She had thought about spending the winter in the Beneficio hippie community but right now she was definitely going the wrong way.

Our driver, Serkan, was a nice 35-year-old bloke. He and his wife lived in Romania although he was originally Turkish. Now he was transporting palm trees from Romania to Georgia. Palm trees? They have palm trees in Romania? Serkan's English wasn't too good but somehow we managed to communicate.

"Come with me to Georgia," Serkan suggested.

"We would need visas," I hesitated.

"No need," Serkan assured.

"Want to go?" Viktoria asked.

We had both arrived in Turkey being slightly clueless of what to do next in life. The idea of hitching to Portugal had first seemed like a daunting challenge but once reached it came out as only a minor stepping stone for further adventures. The foolish whim of reuniting with V had also felt like a near-insurmountable mountain top but when reached it appeared as yet another summit with an irrefutably magnificent view.

Descending from there alone had been painfully cold. And although I had now reached a place where I could enjoy the last bits of summer I knew that even this far South, the autumn was already knocking on the door. Still, come hell or high water, I was confident that I wouldn't have to open that door alone.

Viktoria appeared really enthusiastic to go to Georgia. And admittedly I had nothing better to do.

"Let's go to Georgia then," I promised.

"Lovely! Thank you!" Viktoria was overjoyed.

"Are you married?" Serkan asked. How was I supposed to answer this question? Hitchwiki had advised that single women hitching in Turkey should say they are married just to avoid complications. I didn't want to be dishonest but Viktoria's shocked expression from last night had etched in my memory. I glanced at her.

"Engaged," Viktoria answered before I could open my mouth. We crossed a long bridge and I smiled at the "Welcome to Asia" sign. Finally out of Europe!

We stayed with Serkan the whole day and night. He was a good man. The scenery changed from lush valleys to barren hills and finally to the waves of the Black Sea. Serkan served us a delicious dinner with white cheese, olives, bread, tomato, cucumber, köfte (meat), beer and raki—Turkish hard liquor spiced with anise.

We spent the night in his truck and the newly engaged couple got to be very close to each other.

"Do you mind if I hug you?" I posed a rhetorical question. We were already spooning.

"No I don't. It feels nice," Viktoria replied.

Maybe I wasn't here to find direction as much as to find a travel companion who could inspire me to re-initiate the spark of going forward—the raison d'être, the purpose, the justification for being on the road. Would this be a fresh start? Would she help me to get over the incessant longing for V? Nomen est omen, right?

The following afternoon I got bored of the humdrum sitting in a truck. "I want to hitch," I told Viktoria.
“That’s what you’re doing,” Viktoria was perplexed.
“No. This is too easy. Let’s hop off and hitch,” I suggested.
“Fucking hell! What an addict!” Viktoria laughed. I persisted and we left Serkan. He gave me a Muslim rosary as a present. Well… thanks.
When Viktoria realized how easy it was to hitch in Turkey she agreed with the decision. Each driver offered us food or at least chai (black tea). Chai was both a caffeine fix and a Turkish excuse for socializing and lazing around. Regardless of numerous breaks we were finally at the border before Serkan.
We passed the Turkish border control and waltzed into a restaurant at the border zone. Viktoria wanted to offer a dinner. “Otherwise I am unable to spend any money. With you everything I need just comes to me for free,” she said with a smile.
We had a really tasty meal of chick peas and continued to the Georgian border control. When I produced my passport the officer took it and ripped off the page with the photo.
“You are not entering the country with this passport!” the woman said tightly.
“What the hell? You ripped it apart?” I was balled. More officers and some cops gathered around.
“Are you blaming her of ripping your passport?” a male officer asked.
“Blaming? That’s what she did!” I gasped for air. Granted, the passport had gone through a lot of hardships but it had not been torn apart previously.
“It was just fine still on the Turkish side,” Viktoria confirmed.
“You are not entering with this passport,” the woman repeated like a robot. The other officers and cops started losing their patience so the friendly male officer took us away from them, still holding the passport. He looked for a place where surveillance cameras wouldn’t see him.
“Just put some transparent scotch tape here on both sides and come again tomorrow,” he instructed. Yeah sure I will. Let’s just skip Georgia.
“Thank you for your help,” I said and we returned back to Turkey. “So, then what?” I asked Viktoria who was both disappointed and shocked.
“No idea,” she said.
“We hitched for two days, thousands of kilometers, just to eat chick peas,” I noted the absurdity of the whole situation. It cracked up Viktoria. She walked to the dark empty road and put her thumb up.
“When you don’t know what to do, hitchhike!”
We got a ride back to the city of Hopa where we got invited to a restaurant. Even if I wasn’t hungry I was glad to get some free food. If they insist. Using the waiter’s iPhone I figured out what is super glue in Turkish and showed my passport. Soon the fellow brought a can of süper yapıştırıcı, grabbed my passport and squeezed a hefty amount of glue on both sides of the loose page. I stared with horror how the pages stuck together within seconds.
And that should get me out of Turkey?
“Should we go to Kurdistan?” Viktoria suggested. Where does all that energy come from? It was well past 3 am but Viktoria wanted to continue hitching from the far North-East corner of this gigantic country to its furthest tip in South-East.
“Yeah, sounds nice. I’ve heard they got terrorists. Maybe we are kidnapped and we get a free ride to Iran,” I replied ironically.
“You don’t want to? Okay, how about this Beneficio place?” Viktoria asked.
“Southern Spain is a tad too far. Let’s just go to Kurdistan. I’m just a little tired.”
We hitched through the night and slept in the car, ate free breakfast with miners, kept going, sent a few couch requests to a city of Van for the next day and finally ended up at the coast of Lake Van. I was no longer tired because we had snoozed most of the way. We walked along the coast, looking for an appropriate place to camp.
“Good evening,” a forty-something Turkish guy smiled in front of a restaurant.
“Evening, evening,” I responded nonchalantly. It was somewhat irritating to be treated differently just because you are white.
“Chai?” the man queried.
“Para yok,” I explained in Turkish that we don’t have money. He placed his hand on his chest meaning it would be on him. Well, why not. It’s only the twelfth cup of the day.
The man introduced himself as Batu and took us to a table. Soon we were joined by a young Iranian waiter, Ali, who treated me with a cigarette. Partly in Turkish, partly in English and partly using sign language we reached a conclusion: we’d stay and enjoy both an amazingly delicious fish dinner and the sunset by the lake.
Moreover, when they heard that we had no idea where to camp, they demanded that we stayed. They appeared harmless and friendly so we sat down to enjoy the liquid freebies on offer. Incredible generosity.
We had great fun for a few hours. At midnight, we were all sitting by the bonfire. Then, everything changed.
Ali had been belting drinks down, getting cookeeyed and annoying. I took some distance and went behind the restaurant where there were two amazingly cute yet timid rottweilers. They greeted me kneeling down
submissively and wagged their cut tails enthusiastically. That's no rottweiler behavior. What's wrong? I didn't know what the dogs are called so I named them Rosa and Rambo. Easy guys! Easy! They were begging for me to scratch them. It seemed like no one had shown them any affection.

I was just petting Rosa when, suddenly, Ali walked past and kicked Rambo without a reason. You fucking prick! The dog wailed in panic but the short leash prevented its escape.

"Don't you dare doing that again, asshole! Leave the dogs alone!" I shouted in a tone that even someone with no basic English skills could understand. That just fired him up more. He returned and started kicking Rosa, growling something hideous in Persian. I tried to intervene and received a nice semi-volley in my ribs.

Batu came there running and screamed Ali to stop. No effect. The plastered Iranian continued molesting the dogs. Enough! I grabbed Ali by his shoulders and moved him aside. I held him down and shouted to him in Finnish, rolling the R for emphasis: "Perrrkele!"

That calmed him down. I let go and he sneaked somewhere out of sight. He's going to kill these dogs if we don't free them. No wonder they are so timid. I went to appease Rosa and tried to figure out how to unlock its collar.

Viktoria came to see what the noise was all about. She looked clueless. "Will you take this guy away from me," I pointed at Batu whose hysterical jabbering was disturbing my concentration. She didn't ask questions but obediently took Batu aside.

"Rambo, sit! Calm down!" I ordered the dog who was frantically running around. Poor thing is so excited to get free. I was trying to pull the collar over Rosa's head. This is not going to work. It's too tight. I moved to Rambo.

Batu came back and held Rambo gently. Oh, he wants to help. He was petting Rambo and I managed to loosen its collar. "Got it!" I rejoiced as Rambo broke free. Viktoria cheered next to me.

Rambo ran around the yard and enjoyed its freedom. But it didn't leave. It came back to snivel and hug Rosa. It wouldn't go anywhere alone.

"Try to cut the collar," Viktoria passed me a Swiss knife. Rosa, take it easy. Give me five minutes to work on this and you are free. The telepathic connection worked. Now Rosa sat calmly and Rambo waited patiently.

Suddenly Batu shrieked something in Turkish, his eyes watering. I looked behind and saw Ali approaching me with a one-meter-long kebab knife and murderous gaze. Batu charged to stop him. Too late.

He swung.

I dodged.


Ali returned with a series of slashes but I survived with minor wounds on my arms and back. But I knew he only needs one proper swing and I'm dead. That's a big fucking knife. What can I do? Nothing.

I tried to find a way to message Ali that I'm unarmed and will not fight back. I threw away my t-shirt and even the belt that—with good imagination—could have been used for self-defense. I wiped blood off of my arms and momentarily lost the sight of Ali. Where did he go?

"Eeeek!" I heard Viktoria screaming. Ali had gone after her. I saw how she collapsed in the ground. Ali laid on top of her. Batu ran after him and tackled him. Viktoria got up, sobbing in shock.

"Viktoria, now you start walking along that road. Don't look back! I will follow when things here have settled," I articulated clearly and pointed towards the dark road. She went but not towards the road. Instead, she walked into the restaurant. Is she getting her backpack? No! There is no time to waste. Forget about the stuff!

Batu was unable to stop Ali. The bloodthirsty Iranian approached me again, holding his weapon in the air. I took a few steps back, trying to buy some precious seconds for Viktoria to escape. Ali raised his finger on his throat and eyes filled with homicidal hatred signaled that I would soon be a dead man.

If this is the end, so be it. I didn't want to defend. The long knife glimmered against the night sky. My eyes were fixed at the blade that started towards me. I was ready to die. Just before the knife hit me I turned around instinctively. I felt the cold blade slicing the flesh in my back.

I closed my eyes. No pain.

Silence.

Hmm, still alive? Yes.

I reached to my back and noticed blood gushing out. Alive, but about to bleed to death. "Viktoria, run!" I bawled at the top of my lungs.

I had no idea where Ali and Viktoria were. But now I had to be selfish to survive. I went to the bathroom to clean my back and tried to figure out feverishly how to patch the wound before I would lose too much blood. Batu followed and waited hysterically at the door. "Would you bring me something to tie this up," I asked calmly and showed him my back.

Batu was blubbering like a baby. I see, English doesn't seem to work with these guys. "Perrrkele, kirrrristys-side!" I asked for a tourniquet in Finnish, in a slightly demanding tone. The fellow disappeared in a second. Alright, that struck home!

Soon Batu returned with a plastic table cloth. He helped me to tie it around my torso. The worst was over.
Nice flower pattern.

"Batu, where is Viktoria?"

"Come," Batu ran to the car. I followed and grabbed my belt from the ground, not to drop my pants.

Ali had ran after Viktoria and Batu seemed to know which way to go. He took the driver’s seat. After a hundred meters I noticed Viktoria's backpack.

"Slow down!" I yelled. There was no sign of Viktoria.

"Drive!" I pointed forward.

No way she could have made it this far. "Turn around!" Batu obeyed.

We came back to the backpack. "Reemmus!" I heard Viktoria screaming in the gutter. As soon as I opened the door Ali jumped out of the bushes and fled. No more knife. I ran after him like crazy but I couldn't catch the quick Iranian. Viktoria had avoided being raped at the last minute. In shock she had shat her pants.

She escaped to the car. "Batu, hospital!" I ordered and hopped to the backseat next to Viktoria.

Batu drove like a maniac along the dark small road somewhere in the middle of nowhere, picked up someone who claimed to be a doctor and took us to an abandoned building. Is this is where they are planning to operate me? No way! Both me and Viktoria started protesting loudly.

Seemingly Batu was afraid that he would be in trouble with the officials although he had done nothing wrong. Eventually he agreed to take us to a real hospital where Viktoria could finally wash her pants and I could get rid off the ridiculous flower corset I had been wearing.

I laid on my belly and waited to get treated. The doctor did nothing. He just looked at the wound and socialized with Batu. I felt how the wound opened and blood trickled down my back.

"Umm, could you please clean it and patch it?" I asked the doctor.

No reply.

"Clean it! Alcohol!" I raised my voice.

Still no reply. He doesn’t speak English either? Well, Finnish usually works…

"Alkoholia! Koskenkorvaa, Smirnoffia, Rakia, perrkele!" I made noise to get the doctor's attention. Finally he cleaned the wound and put a patch on it. No stitches? Whatever.

In the end we made it to the police station. There were some twelve experts who didn’t seem to speak much of English. Everyone asked the same questions over and over again. Frustrated, we tried to deliver two main points:

a) Bring us someone who speaks English and we'll share the story—once!

b) Do you see that red plaster? Well, it conceals a wound. Could that be stitched by any chance?

Finally they fixed the wound properly. Then some five hours of senseless bureaucracy, stupid questions, incrimination, bouncing from one place to another and few chosen words in Finnish followed.

"Umm, would it be possible to finish this soon? We haven’t slept at all. Getting a bit drowsy," I explained at the police headquarters.

"First we eat," the police commissioner said.

"Eat?" Viktoria asked.

"Chai?" the commissioner smiled and offered tea. It felt absurd to have breakfast with a bunch of jovial police officers whose massive black riles were resting nicely on the table next to the delicious food.

Once we were done eating one of the detectives suggested that Viktoria would go to the crime scene and explain there what had happened. That suited me. It gave me time to think. The thoughts were not so nice. If I see him I will cut his bollocks with a kebab knife and let the dogs have 'em! No, death sentence is what he deserves. He will not hurt any more dogs, will not rape any more women…

In about an hour they took me to the crime scene. As we approached the restaurant I burst into tears. I couldn't play the role of a tough guy anymore. I was emotionally shattered. Viktoria was there to see me and joined me in the car.

"Are the dogs still there?"

"The dogs are fine. I gave them liters of water to drink. Remmus, I don't know how to put this," Viktoria started with her angelic soft voice.

"What? Did they catch him?" I asked venomously.

"He was sleeping when we arrived. The crime scene is full of evidence. He had brought back the knife and had not even wiped off the blood," Viktoria explained.

"Isn't it a clear case then? Can't we just go and sleep?" I wailed. Viktoria looked at me silently for a moment and caressed my hair.

"The cops say that we just have to sign the testimonial. He will be sentenced and deported out of the country. He will spend rest of his life in an Iranian prison," Viktoria told.

"Good. He deserves that. I just don't know if the punishment is big enough," my speech got slurred.

"Remmus, when I saw him this morning, this adolescent coward, I forgave him," Viktoria surprised me.

My heart missed a beat. I wiped my eyes.

"You what? You forgave him?" I didn't follow.
“I was able to see last night’s events separately from what he really is. There are no good and bad people. People just do silly things once in a while.”

“But he…”

“Remmus, we are all one. I wouldn’t wish that kind of destiny to anyone. I just knew that I have to forgive. That’s what we are supposed to learn from last night’s events. It’s time to forgive,” she pleaded.

“You’re putting me on a very bad spot.”

“I’m sorry that you have to make this kind of decision on your own but Ali’s future depends on you,” Viktoria shocked me with her words.

“What if he rapes someone else? What if he kills Rosa and Rambo? He has to be punished!” I shrieked.

Viktoria remained silent for a while.

“Remmus, I understand what’s going on in your head. I don’t know how I would react if Ali had had time to rape me… probably with the same rage and anger. But, if you want, you can take this as a spiritual exercise,” Viktoria said.

“What do you mean?”

“Last night’s events are due to karma. It wasn’t accidental. You can now atone for something that you have done or left undone in this or previous lives. The continuum of life is a series of causes and effects. Between them there is free will. You can choose your reaction to the cause and thus influence the effect,” Viktoria philosophized and looked deep into my eye. I paused to think.

“I understand. I want to talk with him,” I sighed and wiped my tears.
“If you think prison is the best place for me to change my life I’m ready to go there. But if you forgive me the horrible atrocities I committed yesterday I will be forever grateful to you and do my utmost to change outside of the prison walls” Ali said with the help of an interpreter. His eyes were watering. We had grilled him for more than an hour.

The cops were perplexed that we still talked about the issue although they had been ready to jail Ali. Viktoria was excitedly waiting for my verdict. For me everything was clear. Now we are atoning heaps of karma.

“You don’t have to go to prison,” I said with a deep sigh.

“Thank you!” Ali cried out in English and came to hug me.

“Watch out for the back!” I was alarmed but he wouldn’t let go. I melted.

The bureaucratic process carried on till late afternoon. They took great care in formulating the official report of the incident. Attempted rape was not mentioned at all. If I understood correctly everything was accounted for with the fact that Ali had been drunk. Whatever. We did our best. Now it’s up to Ali to change his life.

Ali walked on the corridors negligently. We smoked cigarettes and drank tea together without uttering a word. Enough had been said. Air between us had cleared. Fuck, if I mention this to anyone they all think hitchhiking is dangerous. But this had nothing to do with hitchhiking. Getting hammered with someone who is equipped with a one-meter-long knife… that’s dangerous.

I squatted a free cell for a couple of hours, slept and waited for the report to be done. I was relieved that no one had the guts to bother me with a hospital invoice.

Finally we were free to go. I gave Ali the Muslim Rosary that had been a gift from Serkan. I could finally see its value but I thought Ali might need it more.

Viktoria had received a text message from Yüksekova, the southernmost city in Kurdistan. A hitchhiker-couchsurfer called Veli was expecting to host us. I told Viktoria that it’s also a Finnish name and means “brother”. She hesitated if I still wanted to go amidst the terrorists after all that had happened. I had no need to change the plan as long as I didn’t have to lean on the car seats too much.

“You know, I read Veli’s profile more carefully when you were sleeping at the police station,” Viktoria said as if hiding something.

“So what?” I asked.

“He’s a doctor,” Viktoria said joyously. “You don’t have to worry about who is going to remove the stitches. Moneyless hitchhiker got lucky again! Or maybe the universe intervened,” Viktoria smiled.

We ended up staying in Yüksekova for a week. Veli was very busy because he had just started as emergency doctor in the worst crisis area. According to him he received 300-400 patients a day. Most of them had sore throats or small wounds but Veli didn’t dare to deny their entry to the emergency service. It could have been dangerous for his own health. At times he was patching up kids who had lost half of their face in a bomb blast.

My case was easier. The stitched wounds had swollen but healing. Veli took the patch away and cleaned my back. But he didn’t have gauze at home.

“Try that,” Viktoria said. Veli bursted in laughter and taped something in my back. It was a women’s sanitary pad.

“Pussywipe in my back? Just laugh at the crippled,” I chuckled. Humor was a good way to deal with sensitive issues.

I noticed while cooking that I had developed an abomination for knives. All sharp objects reminded me of what had happened. Moreover, I was overly nurturing for Viktoria. Even if she just popped by to a nearby store alone I started thinking what horrendous things could happen to her. She had nightmares. But talking helped. Little by little also the mental scars started to heal. We spent every night next to each other.

“Good night my teddy bear,” Viktoria wished, cute as ever.

“Good night… I try not to fall in love with you,” I blurted out.

“And I try not to kiss you,” Viktoria responded.

We didn’t kiss. We just cuddled. This feels good but it doesn’t fill the void V left. I had tried to rid V from my mind but every night she came to my dreams.

Veli took good care of us. Although he sent half of his salary to his parents the doctor’s wages were still abundant. He wanted to pay for everything even if we resisted. Money didn’t mean a thing for him.

One day we hitched with Veli to Yeşiltaş—a Kurdish village of 800 inhabitants. Foreign visitors were so rare there that they still remembered a woman who had paid them a visit in 1983. However, the place was so enthralling that she had only left in 1985. They insisted us to stay for the night. We couldn’t refuse the offer.

We lived with them like royalty and enjoyed their overwhelming hospitality. Veli translated as the villagers
took turns to introduce us to the surrounding nature and every-day life in the community. The crops were abundant and anyone could pick and eat whatever they found. The medicinal herbs came from the nature as well. Crime was an unknown concept. Mutual arguments were dealt with in the family. Only thing that made them dependent of the Turkish system was energy. That would be easy to fix. Sun was shining year round and crystal clear rapids roared through the village. I knew people who would love to come here with their competence in solar and hydro power.

As I saw the kids at the school yard and I knew how weak the education system is I thought out loud that I wouldn't mind staying here as a teacher. Without asking Veli translated that. “Stay here. You can live with us or we can give you a farm, land, donkey, whatever you need,” the villagers got enthusiastic. Damn, that’s a tempting thought.

Next day we let Yeşıltas behind reluctantly. If I had stayed for another day I might have never left. Maybe one day but now I still have things to learn and teach elsewhere.

After one week of all-inclusive care Veli took out my stitches, for free.

“You are a gift from heaven!” I stood in awe of his nurturing behavior.

“In Turkish Veli means guardian,” he replied with a smile. “Besides, it has been amazing to host you. I want from life what you have offered: adventure, love, genuine caring, courage, no fear and an example of moneyless traveling. I want to get back on the road myself now,” Veli said. Although he had spent eight years of his life to study he was almost ready to leave behind the doctor’s duties for the state.

“Let’s go together,” I suggested.

“I cannot. It’s hard to get a visa,” he hesitated.

“Umm, where are we going Remmus? I mean, am I going where you are going?” Viktoria asked baffled.

“You said you are interested in Buddhism, right?” I asked her.

“Yeah, quite a bit,” Viktoria’s eyes were shining.

“My friend Chara invited us to a Buddhist retreat in Greece. Would you like to tag along?” I asked.

“Do I? Of course! When?” she was bouncing of joy.

“In 72… 78 hours,” I counted looking at the clock.

“What? Three days? To Greece? What’s the distance?” Veli asked.

“Shortest route 3,300 kilometers,” I said.

“Pretty far,” Veli said.

“Have you packed already?” Viktoria didn’t hesitate.

“Yes,” I said and we left.

My mind had changed drastically: what previously appeared a daunting challenge was now a commonplace task. Thus hitchhiking in three days from near the border of Iran and Iraq to a remote village in the mountains of southern Greece seemed doable. Universe was on our side again. Three rides to Istanbul—exactly 2000 km in 30 hours. Wicked!

From there we made it easily to the border where I hitched the shortest ride of my life: 50 meters in a tourist bus. Walking through the border control was not permitted. I hopped out of the bus and got us a very international ride. The border control officer was was mystified when Finnish, Lithuanian, Turkish and Bulgarian passports were handed out from a car with Latvian plates.

The fellow opened my passport that still cracked and crackled due to the super glue although I had tried to fix it. The border guard flipped through the pages slowly and seemed overly interested in exactly my passport. Is this the end of the line?

“Dude has been traveling quite a bit,” he finally said.

“Yeah, I’ve gone some 20,000 km hitchhiking,” I replied. It sounded like I was boasting unnecessarily.

“Cool! I’m going through Russia to Japan next summer,” the fellow rejoiced and gave back my passport.

Gotta just love the border guards in this country!

An average speed of whopping 140 km/h took us quickly to Thessaloniki where a slight drizzle turned into a proper rain. An unsuspecting truck driver was soon staring at two soaked hitchhikers in the dimming evening. Then an Albanian guy with a rakia-addiction picked us up. We took a couple hours of shut-eye on neck-crunching gas station sofas and continued.

Outside Athens there was a toll booth where we were approached by half-amused, half-annoyed officials.

“You cannot stand here,” a lady in yellow vest informed me.

“Yes I can. No problem.” I replied and messaged her that I was in a perfectly upright position.

“No, you cannot be here. It’s dangerous.” she demanded.

“No, it’s not dangerous. I feel safe here.” I grinned.

“Fine, but you cannot stay here. It’s a rule.” she started becoming frustrated and changed her sales pitch all the time.

“Oh, it’s a rule, is it? Who makes the rules? Do you make them? Do you like having rules that tell you how to live?” I gave a litany of questions, smiling politely. She was confused so I reckoned it was time to cut her
some slack and walked up to the street. Maybe it was enough mind-fucking for the morning.

Outside of Korinthos we were picked up by a road service guy who absolutely loved his job. He said that he was blessed to be so lucky to have that job. I had hard time understanding what exactly was so cool about picking people from the highway and towing away their piece-of-shit cars. Maybe he just genuinely enjoyed helping people. He was sorry he couldn't take us further than that but even the couple of kilometers with us made his eyes shine.

We ended up on country road—you know one of those yellow squiggly things on the map—that would take us to Argos, Leonidio and eventually to Peleta: the village of 130 people we were headed for.

We were one hour late. Thanks to Greek punctuality, the program was right about to start. “I love my life!” Viktoria rejoiced of our achievement. We had made it.
The mountain air was crisp and moist after rain. Thick clouds were hanging low and caressing the summits around us.

I didn’t know what to expect. Tibetan Buddhism was completely new to me. All I knew was that the point was to seek for enlightenment and becoming free of samsara, the wheel of life. To die… and not to be born again.

I considered myself a “bad Buddhist”: I ate meat, drank and smoked—and my practice was neither goal oriented nor regular and disciplined. For me a meditative mindset in everyday life was more important than sitting on a pillow on a regular basis. I had acknowledged and accepted my vices and didn’t cling to the idea that I should get rid of them. For now, it was good enough for me.

We went to a large white cubicle tent where the program was about to start. There we met Chara. I told her about our journey and that I’d probably fall asleep during the first Dharma talk. She smiled and said it would take only two hours.

When Her Eminence Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche arrived, everyone stood up. She was joking and smiling in a very familiar Buddhist kind of way. When she got to the nicely decorated pedestal carefully constructed for her she picked her nose in a very familiar Buddhist kind of way.

I was surprised that people started worshiping her, kneeling down and bowing their heads various times. I learned that these repetitive moments are called prostrations, and they are not a form of worship but a carefully compiled series of yogic postures that focus the mind through body in a same way as a mantra, not just a prayer but a breathing practice.

First half an hour she talked about Buddhism in Greece, thanking the organizers and so on. Since everything was translated in Greek, it took a while for her to get started with the good stuff. I tried to keep up my concentration but the fatigue generated by the three-day hitch started kicking in.

I tried labeling my eyelashes “Drowsy” and “Dozy” and letting go of them in a very familiar Buddhist kind of way but they insisted being attached to the rest of my skin. Then Drowsy and Dozy hooked up with their pal Gravity and I pretty much missed the rest of the Dharma talk. I had, however, heard the wise words through my slumber: “You’re only tired if you perceive yourself to be tired”. As the first get-together was adjourned, I became surprisingly alert and awake.

We joined others for dinner. As usual, Viktoria didn’t eat anything. I accepted whatever bits and pieces of food that was offered. Chara got me a beer. I was astounded that nearly everyone ate meat and drank wine or beer. Many of them smoked as well, a fact that was counterin g my decision to be without cigarettes for the weekend.

Although I had tried not to have any expectations, somehow my idea of a Buddhist retreat was very different: humble lodging, vegetarian food, loads of meditation, an occasional yoga session here and there, and probably not too much chatter between the Dharma talks.

But there I was, among a loud posse of Greeks, wildly discussing the Dharma—Buddha’s teachings—and feasting on tasty food and beverages. Maybe I wasn’t that uniquely bad Buddhist after all.

Although some of the people had clearly internalized loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness and equanimity—the qualities of Buddha—still most seemed to be what I call “lifestyle Buddhists”. For some it was trendy and cool to be part of the Buddhist community. I heard one of them say “I was in samsara for four years. Now I’m back in the Dharma.” As if you could just intellectually decide to hop in and out of the plane to enlightenment.

Later I told this lifestyle Buddhist about the massive amounts of goodwill, generosity and hospitality we had witnessed while hitchhiking. “It’s nice to hear there are good people even outside the Dharma,” was the response.

I bit my lip trying not to engage in a pointless conversation of how we are all one and how there is no “Dharma Gang” of exclusive people with business class tickets to enlightenment.

Dharma Tourists
A heavy rain arrived during the night and the carefully constructed tent became a water-balloon about to burst. It was decided to move the Dharma talks to the Inn.

Rinpoche started by going through the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. The first of them was simple: there is suffering. The idea is that you should just accept the fact that in life there is suffering. If you fight it, by constantly looking for something to keep you happy, you just end up miserable. Wait. Is she speaking to me? Maybe it’s me who has to learn a lesson. What have I been looking for for the past months?

“Suffering arises from the attachment to desires,” Rinpoche stated. This was not all new to me but I had not clearly internalized the wisdom. Attachment to desires? Fucking hell, I am hooked on V! And what am I now expecting from Viktoria? Am I a friggin’ pussy addict?

“Well when someone knows what is right and wrong, no one can refute it, and without us knowing it starts satisfying our ego,” she explained. “So we start nurturing our Dharma ego. We know what is right and wrong, no one can refute it, and without us knowing it starts satisfying our ego. Are we past the samsaric ego or not? It’s up to the individuals to make the changes in their own behavior according to the changed conditions. But where’s the poetry in that? I really need to let go of V. But is there something else I have to let go of? Think, think, think…”

When it was time for questions someone wanted to know how to manage other people who might not be that enlightened in their behavior. “To create pure effects one can only create pure causes,” she responded, meaning that you cannot directly influence others’ behavior, just change the conditions, and then it would be up to the individuals to make the changes in their own behavior according to the changed conditions. It made a lot of sense. What’s the point of being greedy and selfish, for instance, if everyone around you is sharing and altruistic?

I wanted to see how she reacts to the question: “how to save the world”. I knew that the world was just fine; it was the humankind that needed salvation from itself. But Rinpoche’s reaction was unexpected.

“Where do you come from?” she asked.

“Earth,” I responded blandly.

“Which part?” she continued with a wide grin on her face.

“North,” I answered teasingly.

“Finland?” she queried with a high-pitch intonation. I was dumb-founded but nodded in agreement. “I thought that was a Finnish question,” she concluded and made everyone laugh.

“Ok. How to save the world? I can hear that question arises from youthful energy. Keep that as an aspiration, not a goal. You’ll do it when you become a Buddha. Right now let’s work as human beings. Adopt a virtuous life-style. You can start with these ten: Don’t harm other living beings, don’t steal, refrain from sexual misconduct, don’t lie, don’t use divisive language, don’t speak harshly, refrain from idle talk, don’t covet, refrain from ill-will and wrong view,” she recited a list of ten courses of wholesome conduct, which reminded me of a certain ten commandments.

I listened carefully and realized that I had pretty much adopted a virtuous life-style already if that was it. Fuck, that’s nine out of ten! I rejoiced to myself.

The Buddhist masters have a way of getting to you. Sometimes it feels like they are talking directly to you—although there might be dozens of people in the audience. That happened to me when Rinpoche was talking about the ego: “Possessions and achievements are one way to nurture the ego. Sometimes when we feel bad about ourselves we go and buy another t-shirt, get new shoes or write another book… Write another book? I mulled over those words. Was I really writing with graceful introspection and altruistic motives, or was I doing it just to serve my ego? Had I really become such a supreme being that I could criticize society, freeloading my way from place to place, expecting every other girl to fall for me?

I listened fully alert as Rinpoche continued about attachment to the so-called “Dharma Ego”. She said that people who manage to notice their ego and control it so that it doesn’t affect their behaviour can easily become very proud of their achievement and slip into ego-centrism again. “As we are past the samsaric ego we start nurturing our Dharma ego. We know what is right and wrong, no one can refute it, and without us noticing it starts satisfying our ego,” she explained.

Shit! That’s exactly what has happened to me. It was a humbling experience. The message was gently thrown straight to my face, like an iron fist cloaked in a silk glove: Start paying attention to your ego again, Reverof! It’s thriving. Do something about it!

That night I wanted to clarify what exactly was going on between me and Viktoria. We had slept very close to each other, hung out together, gave each other back-rubs and that sort of stuff that couples normally do.
The way we behaved had made everyone in the retreat think that we are a couple. Are we a couple?

“Viktoria, I’ve been thinking about this thing between us,” I started as we were about to go to bed. For some reason I blushed and felt shy but I managed to continue: “It’s evident that there is affection between us, right? How would I put it… If there’s something more could you just kiss me?”

“Remmus, I love being with you. I don’t want to endanger our friendship with anything, not even a kiss,” she said and cuddled next to me. I was fine with this arrangement. After all, it wasn’t exactly this Viktoria that consumed my mind the most.

Coming to think of it, it wasn’t love in itself that was causing me gray hair but the craving for love. That craving was coming from the cloud of ego that rained drops of fear on my house of love. The feeling of affection was the roof of the house, closest to and most vulnerable for the craving of ego. Then there were the three pillars of love—lust, long-term partnership and romantic love—that stood in between, holding the roof attached to the foundation of deep love.

For many people even the foundation is not that of love, but instead that of fear. Although I had made the conscious choice of building my house on love, and that foundation was quite strong, it was still withering in the harsh storms of fear that corroded it from time to time.

The pillars had to be taken great care of as well—otherwise fear would make cracks in them and finally let the ego surpass, putting the whole house in danger of collapse.

I had come to terms with the fact that it’s a near impossibility that just one person could help keep all the pillars in shape, but since Viktoria’s departure I had struggled to maintain any of them myself. I knew I mustn’t long for V, that I should let her lead the way she wants, without pushing her one way or another.

I remembered Rinpoche’s wave metaphor. For the first time I could appreciate the time I had shared with V. I shouldn’t expect her to abandon anything for me. Yet deep inside I hoped we would re-unite one day, reminding myself over and over again that I shouldn’t be dependent on any one person, that even in solitude I should be able to hold the house together.

The last night of the retreat I got clarification for the source of my confusion. Yet it wasn’t Rinpoche’s teachings that brought the clarity. I got into a conversation with an old woman called Eleni to whom I had hardly told my name before. She should have not known anything about me. Nonetheless, when she opened her mouth, I was awe-struck.

Suddenly she was telling me how sentimental I was because my mother had been over-loving me. I nodded but refused to give her any clues of my family background. She guessed right that my parents had divorced and I had to admit to that. For very long I had thought that the divorce was the cause for many of the things that followed, but now I understood that it was merely a symptom of the cause: my mother’s overt love for me.

Eleni told how this had affected not only me but everyone in our family: my father had felt let out and my brother had been struggling because of it. All this made sense but the most striking thing she said was yet to come. “Your mother acted like this because in her previous life she was your lady but now she’s your mother. She’s still in love with you.”

I almost fell of my chair. I would have written this off as crazy-talk had I not had the same feeling some half a year ago when my mother had visited me. We had had a few beers, I had amused her with her favorite music from her teenage years and we had taken a few steps on the dance floor. When I had seen the way she looked at me I had got that very same feeling Eleni was now talking about: this woman is in love with me.

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On the way back to Thessaloniki I was lucky to be in the same car with a Buddhist teacher. He was a curious case. He had been with us the whole weekend and I could have never guessed he would be a Buddhist teacher. He wore ordinary clothes and mostly kept to himself. I can’t remember him asking anything from me. He had been just smacked in the face with a ten ton hammer—witho ut any silk around it this time. I fell almost fell of my chair. I would have written this off as crazy-talk had I not had the same feeling some half a year ago when my mother had visited me. We had had a few beers, I had amused her with her favorite music from her teenage years and we had taken a few steps on the dance floor. When I had seen the way she looked at me I had got that very same feeling Eleni was now talking about: this woman is in love with me.

And when I went to bed I thought maybe this was some weird shit that dated back more than our lifetimes. I shouldn’t expect her to abandon anything for me. Yet deep inside I hoped we would re-unite one day, reminding myself over and over again that I shouldn’t be dependent on any one person, that even in solitude I should be able to hold the house together.

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And when I went to bed I thought maybe this was some weird shit that dated back more than our lifetimes. I had never talked about this weird feeling to anyone, just because it was so crazy—but now a complete stranger was telling me the same thing.

Unfortunately Eleni was in a rush to leave. She wrote down her phone number if I wanted to call her and chat more before she disappeared into the darkening evening. I stared at the number in my notebook, gasping air, trying to figure out if what had just happened was merely a dream. 6884183325… I looked at the somewhat random series of numbers trying to see if it was an encoded message of some sort. Usually stuff that ends in my notebook has some sort of a meaning. Holy shit! I had just summed the numbers and got 48 as a result. That’s my mom’s year of birth.

I had been just smacked in the face with a ten ton hammer—without any silk around it this time. I fell into meditation for an hour or so—without giving a rat’s ass about the posture, breathing or any sorts of techniques. I just needed to be still.

On the way back to Thessaloniki I was lucky to be in the same car with a Buddhist teacher. He was a curious case. He had been with us the whole weekend and I could have never guessed he would be a Buddhist teacher. He wore ordinary clothes and mostly kept to himself. I can’t remember him asking anything from Rinpoche. Maybe he didn’t have to.

He had been a monk before—after being a quite ordinary, depressed, neurotic, hash-smoking teenager. He had spent numerous years in various retreats, but he had felt incomplete as a monk and eventually decided to leave. He had had a companion with whom he wanted to share his life with. He even got married hurriedly just
to be separated shortly. Now he was finally in a satisfying relationship, running a Buddhist center full-time. “It takes a lot of spiritual capacity to integrate the demands of ordinary life with the spiritual practice,” he said.  

Since we had plenty of time to chat while he was not driving, I decided to interview him a bit. First I asked him what he had learned about himself. “I’ve become friends with myself,” he responded and added that his biggest realization has been that he doesn’t have to be special, rid himself of all problems and become a superman.

Then I queried what he has learned about interpersonal relationships. “I’ll give you a very Buddhist answer. First, learn not to harm others and make sure your attitude, words and actions are positive. Second, cultivate openness, love, warmth and compassion. Third, have the right vision: see situations and other people as absolutely sacred,” he summed up.

I must have appeared clueless as to what he meant with the last part. He hastened to elaborate: “To use Christian terminology: see everything—you, others and every-day situations—as manifestation of the divine.” Now it made more sense, but it took time to sink in.

I wanted to know his views on contemporary society. “This is a trap in which we fall every day: we look at what we can change outside. If we want to protect our foot from the rocks we don’t need to cover the whole world with leather,” he used a wonderful metaphor. “If we manage to have real love and compassion in our self that’s all we need to do. Everyone can see what is bad and wrong. Love and compassion is easy to understand intellectually. But to apply it to oneself and put it in practice is more difficult. Then if you still have capacity for doing external changes you do them,” his words reassured me that before Remmus could change the world he would have to change Remmus first.

“If you look at the contemporary society, are we going to better or worse direction?” I tried to provoke him to say something about society. And it worked. He started a lengthy explanation: “We are going to a worse direction. In this age there is a lot of negativity. Hunter-gatherers were more ethical and spiritual than us. But Buddhists don’t believe in paradise where there is no change. There are periods of heavens and hells, so to speak. The less ego-centric and more open people become, the better the outer world becomes as well. And it doesn’t take everyone, just a fraction of us. There is a prophecy that says we are living in a degenerative period: war, conflict and sickness grow until people reach the rock bottom of suffering. At a certain moment they realize we need to change something.”

He didn’t think we are anywhere close to this point yet, but added: “Now we can understand change quicker. There is a strong possibility that change happens really quickly, either for better or for worse. The key thing to understand is that the opposite of me is not you. It’s we. I am included in “we”. It’s not about sacrificing your benefit for the sake of others, but about making sure that everyone can be well.”

We is the opposite of me… Word! “So, one last question: what should I do?” I hoped we would reach a conclusion. He answered: “It’s not that much about doing. When you know how to be, the doing arises from it. What should you do? Stop wasting your time and concentrate on what really matters!”

Oh my…
PART 4: WINTER... OR SUMMER FOREVER?

The secret of life is to 'die before you die'—
and find that there is no death.
Eckhart Tolle
I spent a week with Chara, helping her to write a movie script and trying to sort out things with V. "True giraffe never dies!" she concluded our online discussion. She still giraffes me!

Viktoria had bounced around Athens for a week and wanted to go to Benecio finally. I wonder if Radek is still there? I was burning to reunite with my Czech buddy who I had got to know in Portugal. Why not? I guess another 3,500 km will be a piece of cake.

I met Viktoria in Igoumenitsa harbor where ferries to Bari, Italy, departed. Once again we hit the road without much of a plan. We crossed the Mediterranean with the help of an Iranian truck driver, after making sure that he's not carrying a kebab knife.

On our way we visited Pompeii that was still being excavated amidst the Vesuvius ashes that erupted some two thousand years ago. Now the volcano just chilled on the background as the evening sun gave its last glance to the monumental stone columns and decorative arches, coloring the sky in shades of red and purple.

Once we felt we had had enough of tourist life we decided to try a gutter behind an Italian gas station. It's a very nice hotel when you have a beautiful Lithuanian next to you. Gourmet tip of the day: Autogrill service stations have leftovers for even bigger groups. This time we tried chicken breast, garlic potatoes, minute steaks and tomato-mozzarella salad. A friendly waiter brought even free drinks and a 20-euro note that, however, we left at the table.

One of the most memorable rides was with an American sea captain called Joe who was transporting a Finnish sail boat to Barcelona. He told us that it's possible to hitch a boat ride from Gibraltar to Las Palmas where 250 yachts and sailboats leave towards Caribbean as part of ARC—the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers. "You can make it to South America if you are in Las Palmas at the end of November. But if you miss that, you'll be fucked," he added encouragingly. Alright! That's my ticket to ride!

Joe handed me the keys of his rental truck so he could get a brief shut-eye. I drove as fast as I could. It's rare to be in control of your progress while hitchhiking. Great feeling for change. As Joe was sleeping we had time to discuss with Viktoria.

"Have you ever had magic mushrooms?" Viktoria broke the silence.
"No I haven't," I admitted.
"Rinpoche's teachings reminded me of my mushroom experience in Oslo," Viktoria said.
"Go on!" I urged her.
"We were three friends in the same room… No, going through the whole experience would take too much time. You know, it was a ten hours journey that taught me 4000 years of wisdom. I remember everything," she started.
"Tell the main points. What did you learn?" I asked.
"It opened a new perspective to life. Previously I thought that this physical reality is all there is. But now I've been to… well, other levels of perception," she reminisced.
"Which are?"
"I sensed every cell in my body. I was one with the nature and understood that I'm made of the same stuff as the apple I was eating, or the floor I was resting on. I felt… empty," she looked perplexed.
"Everything is essentially empty. It's pure science. Everything consists of atoms, and an atom is 99.999 per cent empty space. We live in a vacuum. It's funny that people concentrate on the 0.001% that we call physical reality," I pondered. Viktoria appeared pensive. "So, what happened then?" I asked.
"I closed my eyes and looked deep within. I saw this white light. and when I concentrated on it I suddenly moved to a place… a place of love!" Viktoria's eyes glimmered. She continued: "I understood that we are not only these individual, separate; she tried to find the words.
"Egos," I helped.
“Yes. In that place we are some higher beings. Is this too much?” she hesitated.
“No, no. Tell me more!” I encouraged.
“On that level words like ‘me’, ‘I’ and ‘you’ don’t make any sense. They just make you laugh. We felt like we are together ‘we’—part of the same ‘self’. It was so beautiful until...” she stopped abruptly.
“What?”
“One of my friends started acting really weird. She was just shouting and screaming in the toilet. I had no idea what’s going on. Then, suddenly, they asked me to leave. I had no choice but to go and wander alone on the streets of an unknown city in the middle of the night. People were strangely plastic and everything looked artificial. I felt so lonely, as if I was the only sane person around... no, I felt like God,” Viktoria said.
“A God?”
“I had reached the level of God Consciousness. Now, in retrospect, I understand that we are the creator, all of us. But in that moment I was just very, very lonely. It felt like a dream that I would never wake up from. I blamed the whole world for being unreal. Only when I accepted that everything is real, exactly as it should be, I was awakened,” Viktoria’s face turned back to blissful smile.
“What happened then?” I pried.
“Everything fell into place. The whole puzzle of my life kind of collected itself together. All the books that I had read, all the movies I had seen and all the people I had met suddenly had a meaning. Everything was fine. The whole world appeared in its full colour. My senses heightened and I sucked in the energy of the universe. I knew I was part of it and that I create my reality,” Viktoria reminisced.
“That’s what the Buddhist say but they often forget that also the reality creates us. We feed information to our environment and receive it. But these are just words,” I became self-critical.
“No they’re not. I had had a terrible flu earlier. I was allergic to pollen. I nipped off a catkin, smelled it and inhaled with all my might, sucking in the power of nature. It didn't make me sneeze or my nostrils itch. My airways were clear, clean and purified.”
“And you are not allergic any more?” I asked.
“I don’t think so. I decided not to be. I created my reality,” she smiled. “Everything is as it should be. There are no mistakes, failures or reasons to regret. Everything is real, full of life!”
“Did you learn the meaning of life while you were at it?” I teased.
“Well, kind of. I feel like we all have a shared destination: to remember the oneness and to become the creator,” she spoke with conviction.
“To remember?”
“We are born into this reincarnation and forget our past lives. We forget the oneness of everything and think we are separate...” Viktoria was interrupted as Joe woke up and mumbled half asleep.
“Why are the McDonalds tomatoes always the same size, as if cut from the middle of the tomato? What happens to the rest of the tomato? Where are the smaller ends? Or do they just come cylinder-shaped like salami?” We had no idea if Joe was dreaming or awake but this amusing thought completely killed our conversation.
Hitchhiking in Spain was as hard as always. The drivers were pricks, days hot and nights cold. The first night in Spain we spent in an olive grove somewhere between Valencia and Albacete. The second on a field next to Granada.
The winter cold wrenched my guts, made my muscles wiggle uncontrollably and my attempts to sleep futile. I would have rather laid on burning spiky rocks than on that unforgiving cold field. Even my laptop couldn't take the cold. It died! Well, less to carry.
I started questioning if going to Beneficio was such a bright idea after all. I thought maybe it would be nicer to spend the following nights somewhere indoors, rather than in the mountains among a bunch of hippies. But most importantly I started questioning if the universe had just torpedoed my dreams of an endless summer. Maybe I should just give up, hitch back to V and beg for a second chance.
I had grown to be a super-fast hitchhiker: passing sleepy villages, picturesque towns, buzzing cities and artificially bordered countries with ease. But now I had to admit that the winter was faster than me.
The End of the Road

V was in my thoughts always before going to sleep and the first thought in the morning—a clear sign of being madly in love... or just fucking obsessed.

I didn’t go north from Granada. I didn’t even send V a message. Instead, I stuck to the South America plan. There was an amazing nature waiting for me, bizarre cultures and traditions to experience, poor local communities expressing their generosity, maybe a few shamans that would introduce me to ayahuasca and for sure plenty of sexy girls who would help me learn Spanish and Portuguese. No matter what, I would catch one of those 250 ARC boats—through Gran Canaria to the Caribbean and onwards.

But before all that I would have to take Viktoria to Beneficio.

Arriving to Orgiva on a local market day was exciting. Earlier that day hundreds of people from Beneficio had descended from the mountain some five kilometers to the village of Orgiva to dumpster-dive thrown out fruits and vegetables. Naturally there was nothing left for us to scavenge.

Empty-handed we hitched a ride up the mountain. Most of the other people going up had shanty clothes and dreadlocks, some had babies and dogs. It seemed like some of them had spent quite a while in this community. Beneficio had 26 years of history. It had been started by just a couple of people back in the day, without a permission. Now it was flourishing both as a living community and as an alternative travel destination.

Caravans, camper vans, cars and small trucks were lined up in the “entrance” of the place that overlooked the valley of Orgiva. Next to the cars were some shacks that people had built. They had chickens prowling on the yard, clothes drying up and someone playing flute indoors.

As we made our way past the shacks we found a small path that took us up the hill. There was a sign that welcomed us to Beneficio. A few people came down the hill greeting us and instructing us to walk further. Finally we found a grand teepee that was called The Big Lodge. It was right next to a spiral-shaped organic garden and a community kitchen. It was a peaceful place high up in the mountains. All you could hear was a few birds chirping, some people chattering quietly, puppies challenging each other to playful fights and a stream of fresh mountain water coming down from the waterfalls.

Viktoria fell in love with the place instantly and she decided to stay there for longer, putting up her tent by the woods and starting to gather anything that would keep her warm. Although the days were sunny in the mountains, the night time was unforgivingly cold, rainy and windy. Instead of camping in a tent I decided to stay in the Big Lodge for the next four nights. My lungs got filled with smoke, both from the fire and from the countless joints and chillum pipes that were passed around.

Some 200 people were living in Beneficio permanently. They were scattered around the mountain slopes. If you were a traveler like me there was nothing much more to do, apart from smoking weed, than to try and contribute to the common meals, by bringing ingredients or helping in preparation.

Their most pressing need was firewood. Collecting twigs and fallen branches was a tedious and time-consuming task. In this respect this so-called ecological lifestyle was not that environmentally friendly after all. If everyone behaved like this we would have to cut down the last bits of forest within a year or two.

Although it was nice to visit communities like this and there were many deeply aware individuals these communities were not an answer to the most pressing needs of our society. You gotta be where the action is. Isolating yourself from the system does not solve anything.

And even here, among the alternative and peaceful folks, were some who behaved the way they had been conditioned by the system. Some built permanent structures on a free plot of land and later they’d try and sell “their property.” Some had even tried building fences around “their house” but those attempts had been made empty with public ridicule. Yet it was understandable. People had to work really hard if they wished to get established here.

One of the people who had been working hard was my buddy Radek—the Czech guy I had met in the
Hitchgathering and with whom I was supposed to come in Beneficio in the first place. His appearance was even more rugged than earlier and his clothes worn out. It was obvious it had not been a vacation for him.

I was glad to meet him again, but astonished that once we had updated each other on what had happened after Portugal, there was nothing much more to say. I was disappointed to hear that he was planning to go back to Czech Republic, and to find some work. I would have imagined that this rebel would have carried on further. But no; now he was silent, as if he had given up.

I met many interesting characters in Beneficio. One of them was a 60-year-old British Rastafari called Dixon. “The journey is not over, you know,” he told me one morning. I had just bummmed a little bit of tobacco from him to get my morning fix, and now he was standing there about to start a lecture. This moment reminded me of Eleni—the old woman from the Buddhlist retreat. What was it in me that attracted these bozos to preach to me about who I was and what was I supposed to do? I was like a freak-magnet. And yet the freakiest thing was that these complete strangers read me like an open book. How was it possible that people who should have known nothing about me were suddenly able to analyze my situation on the go and give me advice I didn’t ask for?

“A human being is like a water bottle. It can be an empty vessel or filled with spirit,” Dixon was shoving a half-full bottle on my face and poking me with his finger to make sure I was paying attention. “It is our job to fill that vessel with love,” he articulated with his dreadlocks swinging in the wind. I kept nodding in agreement though I must have looked a bit uneasy and surprised. “You know there is a creator, God, who created human being in his image? We are the creator!” It was a statement more than a question.

Suddenly one of the Beneficio puppies ran to me excitedly, climbed to my lap and I started petting it. “So this fellow just came to the creator, is it?” I grinned and scratched the puppy behind its ears.

“When you say that it came to the creator, you have to say it with certain amount of seriousness in your voice,” it was as if Dixon was blaming me of being too light-hearted about the deep thoughts he shared. “The system is working against the creator. The system has no love. It is based on greed and self-interest,” he elaborated and started humming Bob Marley’s One Love: “Let’s get together to fight this Holy Armagiddyon, so when the Man comes there will be no doom. Have pity on those whose chances grows t’inner; there ain’t no hiding place from the Father of Creation.”

Dixon started with his “death to the oppressors!” rants and by the time he got to the biblical stories of the strength residing in Solomon’s hair I somehow managed to sneak out of the one-way conversation.

I guess I had taken the point—if there ever was one. The journey was not finished, I would have to fill myself with love, surround myself with people who are also filled with love and then direct all that positive energy to change the world with the redemption songs yaadi-yaa…

Only after few days in Beneficio, Viktoria already looked like a hermit tramp but she was radiating happiness. “So, Viktoria, you are going to stay here?” I asked her as she was putting her laundry to dry.

“Yeah, are you leaving?” she was taken aback.

“The road is calling,” I said.

“Wait,” Viktoria ran to her tent and fetched a book that she wanted me to have. “This is for you,” Viktoria said. Bill Bryson? Tourist stories… Blaah!

“Thanks! I mean, for this whole time. It was amazing to get to know you. Maybe we'll meet again. Uh, I hate farewells,” I mumbled. Viktoria came to hug me. I left her there to be taken care of by the hippies and hit the road alone.

I now understood that you can keep on moving for two reasons, either to change the external conditions to fit your image of how things should be or to merely feel alive, with no expectations.

Where ever I might be I could still trust that every day was an unexpected adventure, thrusting life force into me in form of places, people and events that made me close my eyes every night with the same thought: If I didn’t wake up in the morning I was sure I had truly lived as if it was my last day on Earth.

I now knew that I had been slightly misinformed thinking that life is what happens between birth and death. It doesn't. Life is a continuum, a cycle that constantly changes shape. Finally I understood the words of Eckhart Tolle: “The secret of life is to ‘die before you die’—and find that there is no death.”

Even science started to acknowledge this. Fritjof Copra put it best: “Every particle in our body was once a part of previous bodies—living or nonliving—and will be a part of future bodies. In this sense, our body will not die but will live on, again and again, because life lives on. We share not only life's molecules but also its
basic principles of organization with the rest of the living world. And since our mind, too, is embodied, our
concepts and metaphors are embedded in the web of life together with our bodies and brains. We belong to the
universe, we are at home in it, and this experience of belonging can make our lives profoundly meaningful.”
On my way to Gibraltar I visited Fuengirola, a small touristic town on the South-East coast of Andalucia.
There were more elderly Finns than Spanish people on the streets. So, this is where they come to die? The
age range of these modern day colonial masters seemed to be between sixty and the grave. They asked me
when would I return home. “I am home,” I replied. I was at home in the universe.
But is my life meaningful?
I arrived in Gibraltar bursting with excitement although I wasn't sure if I would ever make it to South
America. I might stay in the marina for a couple of weeks and even with no luck I could just head to Morocco,
for instance, and find ways to explore Africa, where people are poor by the wallet but rich by the heart.
But what if none of these plans played out as I wanted? The Gibraltar rock stood majestically on my right.
The sun set just to rise again in the morning. Countless days I prowled the Gibraltar marinas, tying contacts,
getting tips, following advice and trying to hitch a boat that would take me to Canary Islands—without suc-
cess. Promising leads turned to bad news. It was tiring and frustrating.
People kept telling me that I was about two weeks late, that most of the boats attending ARC were already
in Las Palmas. Yet they added that I should not give up. That there was still hope. However, every day in the
marina was closer to failure. It was agonizing. I wanted to get moving. Staying still was not my thing.
It was my birthday. Once again I received news that I was not accepted as part of the crew. I had no idea
what to do. I felt lonely and clueless.
The same question kept popping up: Is my life meaningful?
On the outset it seemed like all the travelers were having the time of their lives but what was really going
on inside their heads? This no-money thing did not seem like such a big deal anymore. There were always
ways to raise the bar: some refused to use CouchSurfing because it was too much luxury, too easy, too certain.
Some refused riding in cars and preferred to walk because for them slow travel was much more meaningful.
There were people who renounced national borders and did not use any travel documents, because for them
passports and visas were merely artificial restrictions for freedom of movement.
But for all of them the same question remained: was their life meaningful? Had they become any wiser or
were they just hunting for one experience after another? Fine, I could do all that: drop the luggage, get rid of
my passport, run without shoes… Yet, what would I gain if I kept making my life more and more challenging?
Who would it help if one day I was in the headlines: “A guy travels the world naked”?
I knew I had to keep on moving. Gritting my teeth I walked to the road, raised my thumb and recollected
Viktoria’s words: “When you don’t know what to do, hitchhike!”
The Sheriff and the Little Prince

One can be lonely irrespective of place, if there is no one with familiar face.

One can grow tired of being on the move, if there's no purpose and nothing to prove.

But there's always a place for a nomad like me; new friends to be made, adventures to see.

Let go of the plans, change tactics and hence; Whatever might happen turns out to make sense.

Stubbornness and patience are a useful combination for any hitchhiker. It gets you to places—eventually. Spaniards had told me that it is impossible to hitch a ferry from Algeciras to Tanger without a ticket. But there I was on the deck as the ferry left the harbor and the Gibraltar Rock receded.

It had been surprisingly easy. I had arrived to the harbor, by-passed the ordinary routines of getting a ticket, waiting in line and so forth. I had made it to the ferry in a truck because I had a sign that said “TANGER—Please, it’s my birthday.” Beginner’s mind. That’s what that the Buddhist keep talking about. You don’t always have to follow the conventions.

It felt good to be moving again, even if there was no plan and loneliness tried to push through. Would I make it in time to Las Palmas? Would something great happen tonight? Or will I end up spending my birthday alone?

I got a ride to Casablanca. It sounded like a terrific place. Maybe I would find someone who would offer me a whiskey, pat me on the back and say “happy birthday mate”. Maybe there would even be a marina.

But as soon as I got there reality hit me in the face: there was nothing romantic or beautiful about this city. Nor was there anyone to pat me on the back. Casablanca was a dirty, over-crowded and unwelcoming city for a moneyless traveler.

I prowled the streets for hours, trying to find accommodation but it was hopeless. My only companions were stray dogs. And the closest thing to a human contact was a guard that drove me off from an empty garage. Damn! They have employed poor people to guard the buildings against other poor people. I ended up sleeping in a park, far away from the center, next to other homeless people who had covered themselves in plastic. In the morning I left them a box of KFC chicken and left without waking up anyone.

It turned out there was no marina in the city and I wanted to hitch my way out of Casablanca as fast as possible. I would have liked to check Hitchwiki for the route out of the city but it felt like there are no Internet Cafes around.

When I finally found one I had to explain quite a while before I was granted access to a computer. I had asked a random waiter to translate my story in Arabic on a piece of paper. Magic paper works always! That enabled me to have lunch and internet connection, now that I was traveling without a laptop.

I noticed I had received hundreds of birthday wishes. I felt homesick and I was missing my friends more than ever. I questioned the decision to come to Morocco. What good it does if I go on like this?

I heard that 1,100 kilometers further south was Laayoune—the unofficial capital of Western Sahara—there was a ferry going to Las Palmas every Sunday night. The distance from Laayoune to Las Palmas overseas was just a tad more than 200 km. That was my last chance. If I missed this opportunity I would not make it in time for ARC.

But I didn’t want to rush. I had heard that Marrakech is an amazing place and it was on my way. The good reputation of the city was not exaggeration. I was swept off my feet at the very moment my eyes met the lush
vegetation in the parks, the beautifully crafted arabic medina (a walled city center) and the somewhat clean streets that were bustling with life. Streets lights illuminated the buildings and painted the whole city with shades of orange.

Prowling through the numerous basars, and tasting the local delicacies, I made my way to an internet cafe. I managed to fix a meeting with a local Couchsurfer, Yassine, who was ready to meet up with one-hour notice but not to host. I could still use some company.

I waited for him on Djemaa el Fna, a buzzing square filled with all sorts of merchants, artists, panhandlers, musicians and dancers. The smoke coming from the food stalls filled the air and the continuous drumbeat mixed with the murmur of tourists and locals alike. Damn, how beautiful women! Here the women didn't veil their face.

Yassine arrived and we talked for a while. I told him about our movie project with Chara because he was also interested in scriptwriting. But the discussion didn't catch fire. He was down in the dumps.

His head and heart were filled with worry: the foreign girl he had married in the summer was pregnant and considering abortion. Being thousands of kilometers away from her did not help; email is not the best option to discuss things like this, especially when cultural differences and pressure from parents come into play.

"Uh, come on. You can stay at my place," he finally said. I guess he also needed someone to talk with. At his place we mainly discussed women, culture and movie-making. And how they all intertwine. According to Yassine, a practising Muslim, the cornerstone of society was the family institution and abortion was equal to murder. He was prone to think that the Western girls have too much freedom; that they are brainwashed to be promiscuous and selfish.

Although I did not necessarily agree with everything he said, I understood where he was coming from; his heart-ache was real. I also understood that the freedom he referred to was often illusory—freedom to consume, freedom to act in a certain way and freedom to look like everyone else. Also, I respected the fact that here they still had real families.

I shocked Yassine with my promiscuous stories of V and Amelia. But I could not offer him much advice because I had no experience of a similar situation. Nonetheless he found consolation in the Vaclav Havel quote I shared: "Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

"I guess at least one of our stories deserves a happy ending," he said sullenly. "That's how Hollywood movies go: 'Boy meets a girl. Boy gets the girl. Boy loses the girl. Boy gets the girl back.' And I guess you'll have to be that boy. I'm not quite sure if I want the bitch back," he said. A moment of silence followed. Yassine covered himself with a blanket, ready to go to sleep.

"So, you reckon I should forget about South America and turn back?" I questioned doubtfully, staring at the ceiling.

"That's completely up to you. No one can make that decision for you-u-u." Yassine yawned.

If someone made that decision for me… The uncertainty twisted my guts. "Well, it's a tempting idea but why the hell would I go to Riga in the middle of the winter now that I'm here in the sun. It's just that…"

I was interrupted in mid-sentence.

"Riga? You mean Latvia?" Yassine rolled his eyes.

"Well, yeah… That's where V lives. It can be damn cold there, you know," I clarified.

"Oh, boy. You seem to be obsessed with that woman," he said in a condemning tone and turned to face the wall, ready to snore.

"But didn't you just…" I tried but he was already in the dreamland.

Although I stayed with Yassine only some eight hours, he was definitely one of the special hosts I quickly connected with. I hope I meet him again. His humble house reminded me of the fact that the so-called ordinary people in the West are accustomed to so much luxury. Here a shower, for instance, was not a necessity. Here a simple hole in the ground and a water tap functioned both as a toilet and a bathroom.

Next day I got more cultural experiences. I hitchhiked a donkey out of the center. Then I got picked up by a family that invited me for a Moroccan lunch. I did not refuse the offer.

The dining room was only for men. It was lined with colorful mats and cushions. First tea and biscuits were served. The Moroccan way of making tea is near art: a humongous piece of sugar is dropped in the tea pot. Then tea is poured in the glasses for a few times in order to mix the sugar. Tea is poured high above the glass but it never spills. When it's sweet enough it is served with fresh mint.

After tea we gathered around a small table that was mere ten centimeters above the floor level. The youngest man in the family served as a waiter. He went around and poured water so we could wash our hands. A towel was passed from one man to another. Then he brought a huge plate of chicken that he placed on the table. Round white bread was broken to pieces and distributed in front of everyone. Everyone dug in dipping the bread in the delicious gravy and savoring the chicken. I liked the tradition of eating from the same plate with others. It is such a simple way to increase feeling of unity among friends and relatives.

I ate way too much, just to realize that there was another dish coming. The chicken was replaced with
lamb and devouring continued. The meal was topped off with some fresh fruits, and of course more tea. A series of loud burps messaged that the food had been good.

My trip continued.

On a gas station near Agadir I noticed a German “Diesel & Dust Challenge” group—a charity rally from Dresden, Germany to Banjul, Gambia.

“If you want, you can ride with me,” a driver called Heidi said.

“Where are you going next?” I asked.

“Tomorrow to Laâyoune,” she responded. Seriously? Amazing!

“That’s where I’m going!” I rejoiced. The universe is cooperating once again. Thanks! We set out towards the city of Tiznit.

“We spend the night in Tiznit on a campsite. Where do you want to be dropped off?” Heidi asked surprisingly. What? I don’t want to be dropped off. I go with you… I noticed they did not really appreciate company after all. Unbelievable! They are going the same way and I’m no extra cost for them but still they want to get rid of me.

I ended up spending the night in the campsite shower room and in the morning I managed to haggle a ride a few hundred kilometers forward. I hitched a bus to Tan-Tan. What a lovely name for a city. A helpful fellow with a moped took me to the police checkpoint just outside the city. An hour or so passed and no one would stop. Then I saw the Germans again. I had been faster than them. Please, take me back… Eine kleine Fahrt, P.F. I found myself praying that they would have realized how silly it was to drop me in the first place. Smilingly they passed and wished me bon voyage.

Another free bus ride took me to Tarfaya, a small town of some 5,000 people right on the coast, where Antoine de Saint Exupéry was in 1929 gathering both parts of his airplane from the sand and inspiration for The Little Prince.

I bounced around waving my magic paper but it seemed that no one was going to Laâyoune. Because hitching buses in Morocco didn’t seem to be a problem I thought that the last bus of the day would take me there. Third time was not that charming, however. The bus driver told me to piss off.

One and half hours to get to the ferry. 100 kilometers to go. I panicked. and ran to the dark road. No one there! Frustrated I walked back and forth, kicking dirt and mumbling to myself: “All these rides. All this effort. The whole damn thing for nothing?” A taxi drove by without stopping. No other vehicles in sight. Gritting my teeth, I stared into the darkness. A gushing wind sent shivers down my spine. More than cold it was a shiver of approaching disappointment. I was desperately running out of time. Not even the sand of Sahara was enough to fill my hourglass. It was empty - as empty as my stomach, I noticed. I felt so hungry. After half an hour of pointless waiting I finally admitted it: regardless of all my efforts, I had failed again. The realization made me cry. So close but still so far! ARC would have to remain as mere dream.

Images of warm seas and South American shores changed into the very reality at hand: Remmus Reverof alone in the chilling Saharan night. Nowhere to go. No goal to fulfill. Nothing to eat. No company to share the sorrow. What do I do now? What do I do?

Eyes watering of disappointment I made my way to the nearby gas station. I got bread and olive oil. I munched it with local fellows—Mehdi and Raschid—who were watching football there. They spoke some English at least.

The local sheriff came along with a bunch of armed men. They walked straight to me and asked for a passport. I gave it to them. I wonder what they are up to? He also wanted to see the magic paper I had been flashing around. Let them do their job. The sheriff left with my passport.

After a good half an hour they returned and requested me to step into their vehicle. Are they giving me an express ride to the ferry? Nah, I guess it’s too late. I was too weary, dirty and beaten by the road to care about what was happening so I obeyed. I have done nothing wrong and there is no reason for them to detain me. Wait a minute? Is this because of the glued passport? Well, on the other hand: a night in jail would still be a night indoors.

They did not take me to jail but to a shack they called a hotel. Everyone else except the sheriff were overly polite and humorous. With the help of an interpreter the sheriff exclaimed: “In the morning you leave!” I guess I’m not welcome here.

I got my passport back. Phew!

I did not know the why, where and how of my traveling anymore. It felt pointless. I just knew the with-whom and the answer to that was depressing: nobody. I was alone. Happiness is only real when shared, I mulled over the words of Alexander Supertramp from Into The Wild. Would I also die lonely? It felt bad to be so far away from my friends.

I was also missing V, more than ever. For the first time I felt ready to give up on my dreams just to be with her. Suddenly the idea of being in the cold winter, getting a job at McDonald’s and forgetting about unrestricted love felt secondary if only I could be next to her.
In the morning I dragged myself to an Internet Cafe to send V the same message as four months ago: “Would you host me if I came to Riga?”

The reply was quick: “Of course I would host you, but as a friend. Remmus, I miss you, but you are not the person I think about when I go to bed and when I wake up. Get it? I don’t love you!” Once again my heart was broken. I swallowed my tears. No matter how painful the realization was, it liberated me to go forward, without regrets, without looking back. No more guessing.

I decided to go to Laâyoune anyways, wait for the ferry next Sunday and see if there was even one boat in Las Palmas who would need extra crew for crossing the Atlantic. Just when I got up from the computer Mehdi and Raschid came in. I shared with them both the last night’s events and my plans.

“You cannot go to Laâyoune. It’s too dangerous,” Mehdi said.

“That’s what they all say. Everywhere is dangerous,” I didn’t believe a word.

“I mean really. The police just attacked the rebel camp and killed five people. Even as we speak there might be a curfew. They don’t want foreigners there,” Raschid explained.

“They don’t want us here either. The sheriff is off-the-wall,” I said.

“You can sleep at my place,” Mehdi offered.

“Oh, thanks!” I was once again surprised by the trust of a stranger.

“Should we first talk to the sheriff just in case?” Raschid suggested. Yeah! Let’s go! Nice to see my old buddy. I agreed to the lads’ suggestion and we waltzed to the police station.

I greeted the sheriff with a wide grin on my face. He started shouting furiously. Although my Arabic is a little bit rusty I am pretty sure he said something like “What the fuck is that guy doing here? Get him the hell out of my police station, out of my town!” Mehdi and Raschid were taken aback.

I had expected something like this and couldn’t help but laugh. That infuriated him even more. He pointed to a cell and shouted incomprehensible ächlämbächläm. “Tell him that I have done nothing wrong or illegal,” I asked Mehdi to translate, smiled and waited for discussion to start.

Suddenly the sheriff pushed me away from him and I almost stumbled down the stairs. What the hell does he think he’s doing? His ridiculous behavior just made me laugh. “Don’t laugh. He tells you to stop smiling,” Mehdi tried to translate, his back pressed against the wall. He was clearly intimidated.


“You! Look! He’s breaking the law!” I pointed at him, grinned and tried to relieve Mehdi’s tension. Little by little the sheriff cooled down as he realized he’s being a jerk. He invited us to his office for a while. It turned out that the reason why he does not want me to be there is that he’s scared something might happen to me and then it would become his responsibility.

“I’m staying with him,” I pointed at Mehdi and continued laughingly: “What do you think he is going to do: rape me or slit my throat with a kebab knife?”

Mehdi translated and it made the sheriff smile. I should have guessed that he’s just another human being, letting fear control his life. I felt sorry for him, but I was happy that we had managed to bring a little light in his life and a smile on his face.
Sand of Sahara

The most distinguished goats of Muslim families wait for Eid al-Adha sacrificial feast like pigs and geese for Christmas. The celebration is to honor Prophet Abraham's dedication to God. He was ready to sacrifice his own son. The story goes something like this:

GOD: Abraham, do you still fancy me? I mean, really?
ABRAHAM: Of course! I practically... worship you!
GOD: I don't believe you.
ABRAHAM: How can you not believe?
GOD: Lack of faith I guess...
ABRAHAM: I love you! What can I do to prove it to you?
GOD: Well, it would be nice to get some flowers now and then.
ABRAHAM: I'll bring you flowers. What else?
GOD: I kinda like chocolate.
ABRAHAM: I'll give you chocolate.
GOD: Nice but how do I know that I'm the one and only?
ABRAHAM: I'll do anything to prove it!
GOD: Kill your son.
ABRAHAM: What?
GOD: You heard me. Ismael, the blasphemous bastard. Whack him!
ABRAHAM: I love you! What can I do to prove it to you?
GOD: Stop insulting me! Hell, this has to change. We need commandments!
ABRAHAM: So, shall I kill Ishmael?
GOD: What? Kill the goat for instance.
GOAT: What the fuck! Meh-eh-eh-eh!

I spent six days with Mehdi. Timing could have not been better. The Eid al-Adha week was really relaxing: reading, lying on the beach, loitering at street, 486 handshakes with passers-by, snooker, sweating in hamam and of course eating goat in all possible ways. Food was always delicious and organic for sure, although you didn't always know which part of the beast you were munching.

On Saturday night dinner Mehdi's mum was touched nearly to tears. She said, according to Mehdi: “Thank you Remmus for being here with us on this special week. You made our family complete.” I was perplexed. It was me who was supposed to be grateful: a roof over my head, great company and some friggin' goat eye milk shakes served on a daily basis.

I was so dependent on other people's good will I had no other choice but to accept what is given to me and to trust that everything that happens turns out makes sense. I realized that as I had willingly accepted the gift from Mehdi's family I had acted out what kabbalah calls “receiving for the sake of giving”—the highest modality of existence. Intense! I have developed without noticing it. Moneyless living and being on the road proved not to be in vain after all.

On Sunday I was itching to hitch.

“I know you don't want people to pay anything for you but could I offer you a cab ride to Laâyoune?” Mehdi asked. He wanted to make sure that this time I make it in time to the harbor. Taking into account what I had just learned I couldn't refuse the git. But before departure I had one more git to receive. Mehdi's mum had prepared a festive lunch. We all gathered around the table.

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“What are we having today? Goat, I presume. Is there any more left?” I joked.

“Today we eat the brain of the goat,” Mehdi announced licking his lips.

Oh, the brain. Meh-eh-eh-eh! Ignorance would have been a bliss.

Mehdi's mum brought a sizzling pan full of lumpy things. Bread was ripped into pieces and distributed to everyone. I was waiting for someone to start. Everyone waited for me to start. Damn you Ishmael what you have done! How can I get out of this without hurting anyone's feelings? I guess it's too late to say I'm...
vegetarian. I reached for the pan holding a piece of bread. I dipped it into the brain jam and scooped a lumpy thingy on top of it. Everyone stared at me expectantly. The lumpy thing dropped on the table. Damn it! Slippy... I brought the lumpy thing under my nose. It had a brain-like odor. What wouldn't you do to please the giver? Hell, I'll give it a go!

I put it in my mouth and chewed.
I swallowed.

"Mum wants to know how you like it," Mehdi pried.
"Amazingly good!" I responded with surprise and took some more.

The lunch postponed my departure way too much. It was already late afternoon and the village seemed very much taxi-deprived. Here it was customary that the car won't move before it's full. I mean, really full. It feels stupid not to hitch and still wait for the ride. The sun went down and I started doubting whether I would make it in time to the ferry after all. Maybe I'm not supposed to go. Maybe the universe tries to tell me not to go. I had started believing in my own universe crap. Have I hung out too much with religious folk?

Finally the cab arrived. I hugged Mehdi goodbye. Great guy! Hope to see him again! I got to Laâyoune in time and hitched a ride to the harbor with some nice Moroccan lads who were going home to Gran Canaria. In the harbor my jaw dropped. So many fucking cops! All cars were checked thoroughly, for chocolate. That's what they called hash here. But there are no trucks! How the hell are you getting to the ferry, Reverof? Luckily, I had prepared.

An angry harbor officer couldn't understand that I wished to board the ferry without a ticket. He blasted me in both achlambachlam and parlezvousfrancaise and, for what I gathered, he demanded me to go through the ordinary process of exchanging paper notes into other pieces of paper before I'd be eligible to talk to him again.

I showed him a note that said in French: "My name is Remmus Reverof. I am from Finland. I have traveled some 30,000 km completely without money. My dream is to pass through the Canary Islands to South America. Would you be so kind and, please, help me realize my dreams?"

It worked. The officer became somewhat friendly. He started bouncing around, trying to find a loop hole that would allow me to board the ferry. I waited patiently although I knew that I was running out of time.

Finally the officer came back and said there was nothing he could do. The matter belonged to the ferry company. I got assistance from a cop who I had bummed a cigarette from. We walked together to the ticket office. He asked them if I could have a free ticket.

Mmmyeah, no!

I wasn't that good in taking "no" for an answer, so I approached the ferry lines personnel myself. I worked my way up their hierarchy ladder until finally one official looking fellow agreed to go and check with the captain. The boat would leave in exactly 52 minutes. The Saharwi night was freezing. Somehow I had thought that if there's a place with +30 degrees celsius during the day, it cannot be that cold at night. I was shivering but it wouldn't wipe away the silly trusting smile on my face. I stared at the ferry, fingers crossed, as more and more people got on board. An odd thought occurred: maybe I should pray? I'll do anything to get on that ferry. Once I'm on the deck I will thank Allah, Buddha, Jesus, Santa Claus and all sorts of saints. Just let me board the ship!

Quarter to ten I started panicking. 15 minutes. They were closing the gate. Harbor personnel were collecting the fences away. The customs people packed their bags. The police retreated indoors. Awkwardly lonely suddenly. And where is that guy who was supposed to ask the captain? Here! I ran to the man.

"The captain says it's not possible," he told. Fuck those worthless saints! Somehow I could not even feel disappointed anymore. There was like an invisible wall between me and the Canary Islands. And the wall was called money. Of course I could have collected, say, five euros each from nine people and covered the ticket, but I wanted to stay true to my principles. Hmm, should I revise the principles?

My new cop friend came to console. "So it didn't work out? Come back tomorrow morning. Here's a sand ship going to Las Palmas three times a week," he explained. A sand ship? Why not? You should have told me earlier!

I ended up spending the night in the uncompleted top floor of a karate studio, in the middle of rubble, mortar and tools, with a poor old toothless guy called Achmed—that's Achmed with a profound krhhh sound. He had practically nothing but the little he had he shared. He made me a bed on a flea-infested mattress. I fell asleep happy.

Oozing enthusiasm I hurried back to the harbor next day. Yet there was nothing to be enthusiastic about. It was quiet. Just an occasional worker here and there, piles of sand to be shipped and seagulls circulating in the sky, waiting for leftovers from the fishermen's catch. I climbed over the sand piles to the shipping agency. No one there.

Outside I met my cop friend. "No sand ship today," he said. Of course. What was I expecting; an open-armed welcome on a red carpet and early morning delivery to Las Palmas with champagne and strawberries in my private cabin? "Tomorrow," the cop announced. Mañana, mañana... These guys are more Spanish than the Spanish... Well, one more day. I wonder if Achmed minds? He didn't. Chilling out, lunch with a magic
Next morning was different. There were trucks going to the harbor all the time and a massive ship pulled into the docks. That’s it! That’s my ride. I was already visualizing how I would charm the captain with my story and how he’d invite me on board. Together we’d smoke some chocolate, yeah, would drink some champagne… The only problem was that this particular ship was not going to Las Palmas, but to Senegal. You got to be kidding me! 

I swallowed the bitter tears of defeat once more. I will not give up now! I am so close to success. There are boats and it’s possible to hitch them. The manager of the agency was helpful. He told me to come back 8:00 am… mañana. He wrote down the time and the name of the ship on a piece of paper and handed it to me. It wasn’t official or glossy paper it had some nice ink markings on it. This is my ticket out of here!

I celebrated the ticket by allowing myself to relax for the rest of the day. I went to the sea shore where the dunes of Sahara met the waves of the Atlantic. Temperature was a good +30 degrees Celsius. As I laid down there in the sun I realized that this was the kind of place that I had imagined for the winter. Is this the summer forever?

I was alone. There was no one to share my joy. What do you really want, Remmus? Although it sounds simple, it’s usually a damn difficult question to answer: what do I really want out of my life right now? But at that time the answers came to me without forcing. I took out a pen and my notebook.

**What do I want?**

* I want to take responsibility and maintain my freedom.
* Genuine relationships: love without limits.
* To write: be inspired to create.
* To cook: serve others.
* To read: learn.

**What do I need for this?**

* A laptop, a kitchen, a place to stay, love.

I hesitated… Was that all? My stubborn ego took over and forced me to finish the list: Sun (preferably). I realized it wasn’t about the sun. It did not really matter where I was or how warm it was, as long as I could fulfill my place in the society, do the things that I’m good at and that give me enjoyment, and most importantly: have the right people around me. Looking for constant summer is like searching for lasting happiness: a source of suffering, not of balance and joy.

I took out the book that I had gotten from Viktoria. I tried to read it to relax but it was useless. My thoughts were running wild.

Remmus, you had a very lonely winter didn’t you?
I guess so.
Your ego was in control and you had bitter resentment against the society, or anything external to you for that matter. You had almost lost your will to live.

What? Yeah, I guess I was a bit… angry. Wait a minute. Am I talking to myself? It was clearly a time to have a meeting with myself once again.

You needed to find lust for life again. In the beginning of your journey many women suddenly appeared to your life, right? You needed to get back in touch with your sexuality. V helped you from winter to spring, so to speak. But you became obsessed with her. And now you need to let go of her. It was always about you and your needs. Never about her. The good old ego created this fantastic idea of an ideal woman and you expected to get all that from her.

I guess I had not been that polyamorous after all… The beer coaster that said “I giraffe U” was still in my pocket. I took it out and stared at it for a moment. Then I ripped it apart.

The voice within continued: You met people who annoyed you. You didn’t realize that the flaws that you loathe in others are your own flaws or something you want to develop in yourself.

Sophia… I would have liked to be more like her: free of worry, going with the flow, without a plan, and seeing life as it is.

You were longing for an uplifting relationship, proximity and pleasure. The spring was over and summer came, metaphorically speaking. But for you to fully enjoy it—to unleash your creativity, joy and enthusiasm—you needed to get your relationships in order. You kept obsessing about past and failed to see what’s right in front of you. You were looking for an eternal summer but blindly you continued towards autumn. You could have learned a great deal from Viktoria if you had just listened!

But I forgave Ali. That was a big lesson!
Okay, that was well done. Now just forgive yourself and the rest of the world. You still have fears and your spiritual growth has stagnated. Do you understand that if you don't do anything the next step is one hell of a winter?

I thought about my self-sermon for a while. Lost in my thoughts I leafed through the pages of the book I had got from Viktoria. On the last page there was a message, written with a ball point pen. I had not noticed it earlier:

_The universe wants us to be individuals so that we would create new. When nature reminds us of our connectedness it ensures a balanced development and quality of our experience. It shows the way. Then everyone can lay their own path. Remmus, you will open your heart. You will learn to feel unconditional love towards yourself and others, to become devoted to spiritual growth and passionate to serve others. Be completely honest, also to yourself. Summer Forever!_

With love, Viktoria.

This reminded me of Viktoria's mushroom experience and Joe's tomatoes. Summer Forever… Be honest to yourself… I glanced again the list that I had written in my notebook. I want to take responsibility and maintain my freedom. What kind of freedom?

I had questioned already earlier if freedom to love, freedom from money-related worries and freedom to move were the kind of freedom I needed. I need freedom from fear, from suffering, from insufficiency. All other wanting, needing, grasping and clinging… Maybe that's what has to go. So, eventually, what I need is what I already have. Nothing more. And in order to see what I have I have to know how to open my eyes.

What about South America? I remembered Hendrick's words: “I have no problem living in a boring place because I surround myself with non-boring people.” I was free to go anywhere: Thessaloniki, Riga, Canary Islands, Yeşiltaş, Poznan, Lyon, Kosovo, Zurich… I don’t have to go to South America.

I slept next night with newly found peace and serenity.

As soon as the sun was up I hurried to the harbor. I leave today, either in a ship or in a car. No more nights bothering Achmed!

I did not see the ship anywhere near the harbor, or at the sea. Hmm… that cannot be a good sign. I hoped I was not late. I had no idea what time it was. I ran to the agency and climbed the stairs to the manager’s office.

“What time is it?” I asked at the door. The manager smiled. It was eight o'clock, sharp. They say Finns are punctual… but this punctual? I sat down and gave him my “ticket”. He examined it for a while, fiddling with his goggles, eyes glued to the paper as if he was reading a prescription written by an unknown doctor. What the hell is he doing? It says the boat's name, date and time. That's all. He wrote it himself. What's taking so long?

“No boat today,” he finally managed to utter.

“What? Let me guess: tomorrow?” I tried not to lose it. The fellow was nodding with an embarrassed look on his face. I've had enough of this mañana-bullshit! He's probably just embarrassed to say “I don't know”.

I thanked him, left for the road and hitched two days North, to the tourist trap called Agadir. I was in need of vacation. And maybe, just maybe, there might be a marina.
Awake.

No direction. No plan. Perfect!

The stylish Agadir beach promenade was several kilometers long. It was snaking around the shore, all the way to the mountain where huge Arabic letters lit up during the night, stating the hierarchy order: “God, country, king.” The beach was dotted with restaurants and hotels. I needed a proper dinner before going to sleep on the beach.

I went into a fancy hotel restaurant and asked for leftovers. I was the only below 60 non-German customer. I was dirty and sweaty. Achmed’s mattress lees still made me itch.

“Sit down, please,” a waiter asked once he had read the magic paper. I was surprised. Suddenly, I was treated like a king. They served me a three course meal, with wine, coffee and cognac. I was stuffed, amazed and nearly crying. I love moneyless life! If I had been an ordinary low-budget traveler it would have never even occurred to me to step into a restaurant like this. Thanks universe! It was very good!

It was near closing time so they gave me the rest of the fried fish to go. I could not possibly eat anymore so I shared it with the guys that I met on the beach. They put together a few recliners and suddenly I had a roof over my head. I crawled into my hut and listened to the waves that lulled me to deep slumber.

In the middle of the night I woke up, realizing that the coffee, wine and cognac wanted to get out and become one with the waves of the Atlantic. I felt lazy. I was so comfortable in my nest. I tried to doze off again but then I remembered a quote from Hillel the Elder: “If not you, then who? If not now, then when?” I accepted the responsibility and went to take a leak.

Next day it started to rain, heavily. Great! Was coming to Agadir yet another pointless episode in the film roll of my sporadic life? I bounced from one shelter to another. Wait a minute. Are those… boats! There was a small marina with some fifty sail boats.

“Most of them are going to Canary Islands. We are just waiting for better weather,” a Russian captain Vladimir told me. My head was whirling of joy. Maybe, after all, I would make it. Maybe I was led here by the universe. Oh, bollocks! Remmus, now stop with that universe baloney! “Low pressure is continuing at least five days,” Vladimir continued. Bummer! Well, it’s an opportunity to get to know the boat owners.

I met a young French guy called Philippe. He was with his two kids and girlfriend Valerie on a cute, tiny, pink vessel. With clothes hanging everywhere, paintings on the side and a surfboard on the deck, it looked more like a jar of pickles decorated with confetti than a sail boat.

“There was just a couple of other travelers asking for a ride. They are touring the world with their bicycles. We will sail together with them if they are not in too much of a rush to leave,” Philippe explained. Uh-huh, I’m not the only one!

“And if they decide to leave earlier? Could I go with you?” I pried.

“Then we’ll have to check that with my girlfriend,” Philippe smirked.

I spent the night at the industrial zone in an abandoned truck and next day I returned to the marina. Another French couple, Jordi and Lucie, invited me to their boat. They had four kids and they were headed to Senegal, after a stop-over in the Canaries. Clearly they didn’t have too much extra space. The kids had been brought up at the sea and they didn’t even know about so called normal life.

“It was a big trouble trying to convince the authorities that we are able to handle the kids’ education on our own,” Jordi said.

“For sure,” I noted.

“Our seven-year old daughter is more advanced in reading, writing and speaking than her nine-year-old cousin in France,” Lucie boasted. Lovely family! If only I could go with them.

“We can take you,” Jordi said.

“We understand if you don’t want to travel with us,” Lucie added and nodded towards the kids who were
screaming inside the boat. Wait… what? Really? Yes, yes, yes! My heart was jumping of joy.

“I would be glad to join you. I love kids, as long as they are not mine,” I replied jokingly. At the same time Phillippe emerged to the pier.

“Hey Remmus, nice seeing you again. Jordi, Lucie, how’s it going? The cyclist-couple decided to take a ferry to Las Palmas. They left somewhere in Sahara.”

“Tony Laeyoune?” I asked.

“Yeah, how did you know?” Phillippe asked.

“Familiar place,” I grinned.

“So, now we might have a place for you,” Phillippe announced with a smile.

“I guess we already agreed that he goes with us,” Jordi said.

“Oh, great! Well, have it as a plan B then!” Phillippe concluded. Unbelievable! What a fortune suddenly!

Plan B proved to be useful. Next day Jordi told me that there were two French hitchhikers who wanted to go with them to Senegal. We agreed that I’d switch to Phillippe’s boat as long as Valerie was fine with it.

Philippe was a boat craftsman and Valerie a graphic designer. We had a wonderful chat accompanied by red wine and cigarettes. Am I supposed to pretend to make a good impression on Valerie? Uh, pointless. I decided to be who I am… which usually is a mistake. I told them honestly that I had absolutely no sailing experience but that I was more than willing to learn. I also told them about my moneyless life. They were listening with great interest. Soon the conversation evolved into a deeply philosophical discussion and connection between us was obvious. They were not your run-of-the-mill worker gnomes but free like the birds in the sky—or the fish in the ocean. They had respect for other human beings as well as nature.

“It would be nice if you would come with us to the Canaries,” Valerie said finally. Yes!

“Yes, it would be nice,” I smiled.

“It’s a two to three day trip. Good practice. We might need someone to cross the Atlantic with us later,” Philippe thought out loud. What, what, what? Cross the Atlantic? I played it cool although inside I was burning with excitement. Finally! This was the reason for all those earlier disappointments!

I spent the night on their boat. Phillippe cleared for me a tiny compartment on the side of the boat, just big enough to fit me and my sleeping bag. The weather was rough, tilting the boat from side to side like a cradle in a blizzard, yet I slept like a baby.

Next day I spent collecting supplies for the trip. The ground beneath my feet was still rocking. It’s like being on drugs. I came back with a bag full of goodies.

“I went shopping,” I grinned and gave the bag to Philippe. These jars of food were now common to everyone on this jar of a boat. My smile was quickly washed away when I saw his serious face in the doorway. “Is something wrong?” I asked, still standing on the deck.

“Remmus, I’m sorry. We cannot take you after all. We decided to break up,” Philippe said with a calm but depressed voice. I was speechless. Oh shit… They have two lovely kids, and they wanted to have time together, traveling and enjoying life. Now what? I could not think of my own disappointment right now. Philippe invited me in for tea. I passed him a paper bag with three pastries in it.

“Thank you. I never thought I’d be having a French croissant in Morocco,” he forced a smile on his face. His eyes were watering as he told me more about their common decision to split up. I consoled him the best I could and left them alone to sort things out.

Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks! Now what? Everything had been so perfect. Maybe I’m really not supposed to go. I was more and more convinced that the universe was trying to catch my attention and shouting to me: “Reeeemmmuuuss! Don’t you get it? You are not supposed to go sailing! Forget about Canary Islands. Forget about South America! I have something else in store for you.” Ah, shut up universe. Let me try once more.

“Vlad, hi! So, you are going to Canaries some time next week?” I greeted a slightly over-weight laid-back Russian captain who was operating a semi-luxury yacht called Yippee Hippie.

“No,” he grunted. Oh, okay, sorry for asking… He continued: “No time to wait. We might go tonight.”

“Oh really?” I was surprised they were ready to defy the weather.

“One of our crew members has a flight from Las Palmas to Russia on Friday. Gotta hurry,” Vladimir explained.

“I see. You think I could tag along?” I blurted out. Smooth, Remmus, smooth.

“I have to ask from the others. You’ll be here?” he said with a voice that did not promise anything.

“Yeah, I’ll be around,” I replied with a non-audible sigh. Vlad went his way to hunt for a beer. It was clear he didn’t want any company, so I just took my book and sat down to read.

After a few hours I went to Yippee Hippie. A deckhand called Jura was washing the boat meticulously. He was about fifty years old, but well-preserved. Although I was nearly freezing in the cold of the night, Jura seemed to be seasoned in all sorts of winds; he was wearing nothing but shorts. I asked for Vlad.

“In the phone,” Jura replied with Russian accent. I waited and watched the water dribble down from the deck into the ocean. I was becoming fed up with all the promising possibilities running dry. I’ll see this one more card. If this does not work I am so out of here.
“Come in,” Jura finally said. I hesitated jumping on the clean deck in my shitty shoes. Pretty far. There was more than a one-meter gap between the pier and the boat. I saw in my mind’s eye how I would fuck everything up by slipping and sliding to the water. “Forget fear, doubt and disbelief,” said Morpheus to Nemo. I jumped. Vladimir was about to finish a Skype call with his girlfriend. He told me that he was home for some 10-20 days of the year and otherwise sailing around the world. He had done it for thirty years now. Luckily the modern technology enabled him to stay in touch with the loved ones even far away.

I wonder if he has already asked the others if I could join them? They don’t seem like leaving anywhere today. Finally Vladimir closed his laptop.

“So, are you going tonight?” I pried.

“Tomorrow morning,” he replied bluntly. A nice guy alright but his answers don’t really reveal any extra information. So… can I go with you?

“Remmus, this is your bed,” Jura showed me a queen-size bed he had just prepared with clean linen.

“Oh, wonderful. Thanks!” I’m going with them! Yes! Unbelievable how things worked out: a luxury yacht, my own room with a huge bed, a private toilet and a shower. Hmm… a shower.

After a refreshing wash we played some chess, ate a very nice meal prepared by Jura, and had a few shots of vodka, as appropriate on a Russian boat. I felt pampered. I retreated to bed as soon as they started watching Con Air. Somehow I didn’t feel like listening Nicolas Cage going “dosvidanjaharashoo”.

Everything was set by the time sun appeared to wish us bon voyage. After so many days of heavy rain, the few rays of sun felt absolutely heavenly. We dropped our passports in the marina office and went to top up the fuel tanks.

“Then we just wait,” Vlad said happily. Well, we waited some more. And once we were done waiting we were told to wait a little bit more. No matter how anxious I was to set sail I had become quite used to waiting. Vlad, on the other hand, was getting ever more restless. We were supposed to leave 10:30 am but still at mid-day there was no sign of life in the marina office. “You don’t have any drugs or weapons in your luggage, do you?” Vlad joked.

“Nah, I had to drop them. Too heavy to carry,” I replied. We waited more. Finally, around 12:50, a police officer arrived with the passports. We followed him into the office.

“Bad news,” the police officer managed to blurt out with his broken English.

“What do you mean? We have been waiting for the whole day. We need to leave,” Vladimir was growing impatient.

“No, no. You okay,” the officer handed him four passports and continued pointing at me: “But this man no go.” I did not know what’s happening but for whatever the reason I was not even surprised. Of course, something would still go belly up. No! Not the glued passport? It was all too perfect to be true.

“Why cannot I go?” I asked calmly.

“I get the stamp. Then boss write: annule. Cannot go,” he showed me the passport page where the stamp was. It had been canceled. When I asked for a reason he just shrugged. Vladimir was blushing with anger.

“How is he supposed to leave the country then; swimming?” he thundered.

“I can do nothing. I stamp. Commissariat write this ‘annule’ after. These two passports also,” he waved two other passports in the air. They belonged to the French.

“Look, Remmus, we really have to leave. Try to go in the commissariat and sort it out. We wait one more hour,” Vlad checked his watch and announced in a firm but compassionate tone: “Two o’clock we leave.”

I didn’t hesitate for a split second. I jogged for 25 minutes and rushed into the commissariat’s office exhausted. It was easy to spot the chief: a middle-aged short-haired gentleman with blue uniform and glasses. This has to be done in ten minutes. Then I have to run back.

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I cannot believe this bullshit! Frustrated, I went back to the marina where I bumped into the French couple. They were flabbergasted as well. They had been told that the boats should have the same crew both upon arrival and departure. That was bullshit. We had heard that just two weeks ago someone here had hitched a boat. Moreover, it was a common practice for captains the world over to recruit new crew members from marinas.

As I watched the Yippee Hippie slide out of the marina I chuckled. I lit up a cigarette and stared at the boat that disappeared behind the wave-breaker, only its mast remaining visible. There goes my last chance. Fucking hell. I’m done with this shit. I took my bags, waved goodbyes and started towards the road.

“What are you going?” Philippe shouted after me.

“Away!” I noted and tried to smile.
I gave a final glance towards the hill. God, country, king… my ass! I decided to go to Marrakech to meet Yassine and Mehdi who also studied there. It was kind of on the way if I was to go to Tanger and try to get out of this country of lovely people and fucked up bureaucracy.

In Marrakeh I orienteered through the maze of small alleyways, trying to find to Yassine's place only relying on my memory. I did find it. Yassine was happy to host me for the night, although my last time's one-hour notice had reduced to no notice at all.

Yassine was no longer consumed by relationship worries. His wife's father had pressured her for abortion. Yassine had cleared his mind and figured that the only reasonable solution is divorce. Now he just needed her to initiate it so he could avoid the costly bureaucratic process. Interesting. If you're broke in Morocco you can't even get a divorce.

"So, it didn't work out. Have you figured out what to do now?" Yassine asked.

"No idea. Still lost," I answered briefly.

"But you seem… more balanced," he said.

"Yeah, I guess I'm fine with being lost now," I grinned.

"Then, maybe you are now ready for the relationship," he said mysteriously.

Next day I met up with Mehdi at his student dormitory. I had to cover my face and sneak in because they wouldn't have let outsiders in willingly. The campus was like a green lush garden but the dorms were quite shabby. The lavatories let out a nauseating smell into the corridors. Boys and girls had been separated in their own pens. In Mehdi's room there were five other students. What the hell? They are actually studying? On Friday night? One of them was praying.

"What do you usually do on weekends?" I asked Mehdi.

"There's nothing much else to do than to sleep," he said.

"In Finland students drink, socialize, have fun, work, participate in extracurricular activities, party, do sports, drink some more—actually, coming to think of it, they are not really studying much," I grinned.

"We can play pool or surf the net. Shall we go?" It was more of a request than a question. We went to an internet café.

I had received a message from Amelia, again. She had been sending me messages regularly, telling about her active student life and volleyball career in Poznan. She had told me how she misses me and how she keeps fantasizing of our potential future travels together. She had invited me there more than once, last time for her recent birthday—a date that I had completely forgotten—and now for Christmas. I had been so blindly in love with V and so consumed with the ARC plan that I had disregarded Amelia's messages almost completely.

Yet, each message was signed with hugs and kisses. In each message she said she loves me. Wait a minute… Could it be? She was online so I opened a chat window:

R: Hi.
A: Hiiiii Remmus Revero!'
R: I wanted to say I'm sorry.
A: For what?
R: I have been so consumed with other stuff that I've been disregarding your messages.
A: Yes you have (grr!). But I still love you.
R: That's what I was thinking. You really love me a lot, don't you?
A: Yes. When we parted our ways in Sines I thought some day we will meet again. Things were left a bit unfinished.

I stared at the cursor blinking on the screen. Fuck, how didn't I see this before? It was so blatantly obvious.
Amelia was madly in love with me. She wanted to be with me. She had kept inviting me there… I loved her too! And what did I do? Nothing.

R: About Christmas…
A: Yes? Are you coming?
R: I might…
A: Come, come, come!
R: Could I borrow your laptop for writing?
A: Of course
R: Could I cook for you every day
A: I’ve been dreaming of that!

It started to be clear that I could have all those things that I wanted: writing, cooking, love and a roof over my head. But there was still one thing that bugged me. There was no point beating around the bush, so I decided to be brutally honest.

R: Would you now fuck me?
A: That’s what I meant with things being ‘unfinished’, that we never made love.

R: Oh… unFinished.
A: Just knock on my door.
R: I might just do that.
A: Are you serious?
R: I’ll decide before I close my eyes tonight.

Mehdi was about to leave the internet café so I had to go also. I did not know if my heart was deciding over my head, the head over the heart, or if I was just guided by my Little Richard, but I was radiating good vibes. I had not felt that good in a month or more.

Amelia had invited me to a common journey. Her call had echoed over lands far away. I had not heard that call over the roar of my inner storm. But now I had finally quelled it and was able to receive the invitation. Amelia was a travel partner whose eyes reflected what was good in me and also what I need to develop. And this partner didn’t mind if other people joined as well.

It was an insane idea: hitchhiking 4000 kilometers from one continent to another, leaving the somewhat warm place and taking a huge leap of faith again. Yet it didn’t take me more than five minutes to decide: I’ll go.

When I was about to go to sleep I was still doubting. I thought about all possible “what if”—scenarios. What if someone offered me a ride to South America? I had a quick meeting with myself. What if… No, it’s decided: I’m going. Really? Yes. Sure? 100%.

Next day I dedicated for preparation. I will plan this one carefully. It’s about 8-14 days on the road, depending on the ferries and luck in Southern Spain. It’s friggin’ minus degrees in Poland. I need clothes. I will make 2-3 stop-overs, probably one in Lyon. Maybe Thierry has some spare clothes… although we destroyed his sombrero.

Come on Remmus, plan, plan, plan… Bollocks! I could not wait my laundry to dry so I could get moving.

In exactly 34.5 hours after making the decision to go, I got my first ride. First 600 kilometers were easy. Everything worked out so perfectly that I started calling it “The Pull”—the pull of love radiating all the way from Amelia. I had not even told her explicitly that I was coming. I let it be a surprise. But I felt she really wants me there. And I wanted to get there, quick!

Second day was probably the biggest challenge. I had to hitch into a truck that goes to a ferry—practically any ferry, going anywhere in Europe. Most of them went to Algeciras. Only this time it was not as simple as when I had arrived to Morocco a month ago. First of all, I had heard that the truck drivers were scared shitless to take hitchhikers who could be drug traffickers. I made a sign in Arabic that says “No Drugs”. Well, probably it just made them more suspicious. The second challenge was that in order to get to the trucks in Tanger Med port you had to pass the customs—a big new shiny building with proper security measures.

“Your ticket, sir.” a guy in orange vest stopped me as I was making my way to the customs.

“I don’t have one. I’m a hitchhiker,” I replied with a smile.

“You don’t have one? But you need a ticket to the ferry,” he insisted, slightly doubting his own words and probably still trying to dig into his memory register and figure out what was a hitchhiker.

“No, I don’t need a ticket. I go with a truck. They can have one passenger plus the driver,” I explained knowingly. He looked dumb-founded.

“A truck? You have a truck?” he was baffled.

“I will pass through the customs, go down to the harbor, and talk to the drivers. I will get into a truck, that goes into a ferry. That’s how I got here. See,” I showed my passport stamp that proved my entry. I hoped he would not start leafing through the other pages because I had no way of explaining the stamp that was canceled in Agadir.

“Where are you going?” he asked.
“First to Spain and eventually to Poland,” I answered with an air of a very confident man.

“Okay,” he said. Ok? Really? I had managed to convince him. The Sunhitcher had just taken one more step away from the sun. Now I just needed to fill the boarding pass and get through the customs.

“Sir, one more question,” he stopped me again. Oh fuck. What now? “Why are you going to Poland?” he queried. My face lit up with delight.

“There is a very special girl, you know,” I replied with a wide smile.

“Ok, good luck with the trucks!” he waved with an encouraging laughter. Love. It was a contagious feeling.

In the customs I was praying again that they would not examine my passport too carefully. What can I say if he asks why the stamp is canceled or why does it make a crackling sound when opened? The guy leafed through the pages. Then he stopped and looked at me a few seconds too long. Shit. I glanced at the passport. No, he was just looking at my picture and comparing it to what he saw behind the glass. Alright. Good to go.

I moved to the x-ray. They checked my bags very carefully. Haha! Your bad! I grinned as the reek of my dirty laundry made them repulsed.

“What’s this?” the guy was fiddling with the food that I had got from the driver.

“No, if I’m not badly mistaken, that would be a can of tuna,” I noted sarcastically.

“We need to inspect your tuna”, the guy said with a slightly robotic official tone. Knock yourself out. He rolled the can in his hands for a while and then let me go.

I made my way to the harbor and started bugging the truck drivers. One after another they shook their heads. Most of them had two people in the truck already. The ones who did not were Spanish. In other words: assholes. It took me hours but finally an elderly Moroccan driver agreed to take me. The best part was that I got one of those “free lunch” tickets. I was surprised that they actually have proper food on the ferry, and beer for heaven’s sake!

I needed every bit of energy available because in Algeciras I was back to Southern Spain. Determinedly I started walking. I knew it would take me ages to get to a proper gas station, so I cut the distance in smaller chunks. Next exit 500 meters. A mere rabbit leap. I walked. Via de servicio 750 meters. A rabbit leap… a bigger rabbit. I walked some more. Bad spot. I walked. I walked. Finally I managed to get to a slightly deserted gas station but there was a guy who took me to Malaga. And there I hit the jackpot! I got a ride straight to Burgos, in Northern Spain, close to the French border. Voila!

My whole body was aching for having to sleep in the car in a very awkward position, but I did not care. I felt The Pull. The closer I got to France the colder it became. I had to wear pretty much everything that I had. Towards the end of the third day I was absolutely tattered. I got slightly stuck on a gas station near Bilbao and thought I had finally run out of luck. Every license plate had “E” in it. Please, universe… Give me something good now. Give me something else than E.

In about 15 minutes a white Volkswagen van stopped at the diesel tank. My eyes lit up of happiness as I saw the license plate: “F” for France.

“Bonsoir monsieur! Enchanté!” I approached the slightly bemused driver with my hand extended for greeting. He turned out to be a Turkish guy from Zurich who had lived in Europe, mostly in Germany, Greece and Switzerland, for the past 26 years. This retired car mechanic was called Aydin. He didn’t speak a word of French but his English was decent enough. With his sharp eyes, bald head, and trekking gear he looked like John Locke—not the philosopher but the character from the TV-series Lost. He was more than happy to give me a ride.

It turned out he had picked up more than 200 hitchhikers in his life. He genuinely liked to help people. He served me with rye bread, salami and Swiss cheese. Heaven! Universe had listened once again. And the happy to give me a ride.

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As always, everything had happened for a reason. Because I was still wearing summer clothes I couldn’t stay outside for more than five minutes at a time. That allowed me time for reflection.

I understood that Aydin had been right. I had not reached the Remmus version 5.0 yet, but now I knew I was on my way to get there—and I knew who would help me grow.

Stubbornness and patience, the qualities of a hard-core hitchhiker, finally took me to Poznan. Funny that I
never thought of applying those qualities to love relationships before. Six days, 19 rides, 4000 kilometers and another 0 euros later—I was knocking at Amelia’s door.

I knew that life is choices, that usually going through one door closes so many others. But this time I knew that taking this door would still leave all the others open. And no matter how freezing the winter was, I would soon feel the warmth that required no sun in the sky.

The Sunhitcher arrived home. Or, so he thought.
Afterword

The writing process of The Sunhitcher was at least as peculiar as the story itself. The material has been collected while hitchhiking approximately 90,000 kilometers in 1.5 years. Some one thousand drivers picked me up in all corners of Europe. I did not go straight lines but zig-zagged back and forth, lingered at times and accelerated on occasion, letting the road decide where to go next. Writing has been done with circa 50 different computers in about 30 countries. It took about 90,000 kilometers and one thousand drivers. And, yes, the lofty sum of zero euro.

When the material was somewhat ready I put it out in the open for people to see and comment. People all around the world pitched in, gave their feedback and used the undersigned as a vessel to shape the story to its final stage. It’s next to impossible to thank everyone individually but here’s a humble try:

Aaron, Anastasia, Ali, Alicia, Andre, Ania, Cay, Chansonnier, Cyprian, Danielle, Devika, Eero, Elisabeth, Francesca, Jaakko, Jaana, Jenni, Julez, Julien, Katarina, Kit, Marita, Matt, Mike, Milton, Oskari, Petar, Petteri, Pippi, Paivi, Roni, Saara, Sara, Santeri, Sema, Solange, Tatu, Toni, Tuomo and the rest… thank you!

Many events had to be deleted, many twists and turns forgotten. Countless people inspired the contents of the story, knowingly or unknowingly. A mixture of them created the characters in this book.

Some have been disappointed to hear that the story is semi-fictional; that they wanted to go out there and show their friends, acquaintances, family and colleagues and shout “look, all these things are possible without money!”; and now they cannot trust what is true and what is not.

Nothing you read is true, as such. Everything that goes through our limited brain is an interpretation of reality. You never get the full picture. What you experience is the truth for you. That experienced knowledge is much more important than any belief, ism, dogma or book.

Go out there, into the world, shed your skin and the burdens of the old society, experience life as it is and write your own story. If you do it properly you’ll find out that, in the end, it’s not your story. It’s our story.

If you’ve understood the meaning of Remmus Reverof, you know that truth can be found within. SUMMER FOREVER!

In Berlin, 17 January 2012,

Tomi Astikainen