

Seriously wrong

Suddenly I feel a hard tug on the rope, a force I have never felt from my reliable and ever-composed companion Izgi. He lets out a cry as he rears onto his hind legs and before I can react, he takes off at full gallop.

Attached to him is Tor, our innocent and wide-eyed follower, who immediately responds to his mentors dramatic change of temperament and with a similarly startled leap he also runs. Caught between them, in an instant I am thrown head first into the dusty earth by the rope that connects the two.

I scramble to my feet to make sense of what just happened. To my horror I watch my horses, now frantically trying to shed their loads running towards the horizon. I clutch my head and I begin to feel the warm sensation of blood trickling down my face and into my eye. As I wipe the mixture of blood and grit from my vision I notice my dog Tetti giving chase, likely convinced this is all a game.

And just like that, I am alone...

'No! No! No! Izgi! Tor! Tetti! Come back!' I fall back to my knees as the gravity of the situation hits me. How can this be happening? Over the past four months I've travelled roughly 1,600 kilometres with these animals. Immersing ourselves in the still thriving, ancient culture of Kazakh nomads in the remote Altai Mountains of Mongolia. I've taken good care of them, and they of me. We've trudged through boggy swamps, glacial rivers, and over precarious mountain passes to visit places I could never access without them. Today was supposed to be an easy day, the battle all but over. A flat trail to arrive at a small eagle festival in the village of Sagsai Sum. There I would hope to meet mister Dalaikhan and like a proud mother, I would return my animals to him and end my journey. But at the last moment, everything has gone wrong. Seriously wrong.

I can feel my heart pounding in my skull and I start to feel dizzy. What do I do now? I just watched everything I own disappear along with my horses and the closest town is still kilometres away. I take a deep breath in an attempt to compose myself when I hear the gentle squeal of a motorbike braking behind me. Two men step off to investigate the situation. Upon seeing the blood on my face they both begin to speak to me in hurried Kazakh. Confused, I look from one man, to the other and back to the first. Through the cacophony of sounds I'm fairly sure I recognise the words 'doctor?' and 'hospital?'.

I shake my head and in my best Kazakh I tell them 'No, me OK. Over there. Two horses. Please!' The men nod, jump back on the bike and race off. Hopefully they understand that I asked them to find my horses... and more importantly if they do, they'll bring them back!

Shortly afterwards, a second motorbike stops and another concerned voice asks 'Doctor? Hospital?'. This time I climb on the back and we ride toward the village. The road is bumpy and every jolt shoots intense pain through my head. I hold on tight and try to ignore it. I focus on small goals. Just get to that ridge, just get past that boulder, that corner, but on and on the road goes seemingly deteriorating with my condition.

Just as I'm about to beg my driver to stop, we pull up out the front of a small building. 'Hospital,' he says, though it doesn't look much like a hospital to me. The door is closed, the paint is peeling from the walls, windows are broken and I don't see any sign suggesting this is any kind of medical facility. My driver knocks on every door, talks to a couple of people in the street and, after a few phone calls, someone finally opens a door. A short woman in a floral headscarf looks at my obvious headwound and signals me to follow.

We walk down a dimly lit corridor until we reach a small room. She wastes no words and points to a dusty bench in the corner. 'Öter', sit. She proceeds to take a pair of latex gloves out of the sink and in shock I watch her wipe off bloodstains from a previous patient. Outside I hear my drivers bike start, he begins to take off and the sound slowly fades away. I take a deep breath with the realisation that I am now at the mercy of this woman. She picks up a small bottle marked

'disinfectant' from the table, two years past its shelf date. I watch as she puts a few drops on a dirty piece of gauze and, dumbstruck, I let her dab it on my head. I barely feel the sting, the combination of dirt, dried blood and matted hair stuck to my wound ensures this is a pointless gesture. How did I end up in this nightmare? I just want to wake up now. Wake up at home, sitting at the kitchen table with my father.

Suddenly the door swings open. A stocky man walks in wearing a pair of riding boots and a long traditional Mongolian coat. He shakes my hand with muddy fingers and introduces himself as the doctor. He takes a rough look at my injury, scribbles something in a pad, then informs me with obvious hand gestures that he intends to give me stitches.

I look at him, my eyes widen. Excuse me? Stitches? Absolutely not! I know enough First Aid to understand that if you stitch up a dirty wound there is a high chance of infection. So close to my brain and being far from proper care, this seems like a terrible idea. This would need to be thoroughly cleaned, but between the dirt on his hands and the state of the room, I'm not filled with confidence. I take my phone out of my pocket and start to type on a translator. 'No stitches. Bandage. Can I buy?' The doctor resists and repeats his treatment plan but I won't be convinced. Besides, I have to get out of here and find my animals. I overpay the doctor for the expired disinfectant and the nurse helps me apply a bandage. 'Rachmet,' I say, thank you, and after an hour in the 'hospital', I'm back on the street.

It is quiet. A stray dog digs through a pile of garbage, the papers swirl in a light breeze. My bare feet feel the chill and I wish the autumn sun would break through the clouds and warm me. I sit down on the sidewalk, shaky and overwhelmed. What do I do now? My head is throbbing and my neck has become so stiff I can hardly move it. Do I have a concussion? Should I call someone? Who? And what would be the point? How I wish we were still together....

PART 1

FREE

*Without new experiences,
something inside us sleeps.*

The sleeper must awaken.

— FRANK HERBERT

Is this all there is?

It is November 2014. I stare motionlessly through the window. Outside, there is a strong wind blowing but here inside, I don't notice it at all. I've been sitting in the same position for hours. Day after day I watch the sun come up and wait for it to go down. My plastered leg resting on the coffee table in front of me.

Two weeks ago I broke my foot in a skydiving accident and since then I've been confined to my father's sofa. That is where I sit now, by myself, just staring. I hear a creak as my father walks down the stairs in his bathrobe. 'Good morning,' I say, despite the fact that it's 1 pm. He pretends he doesn't hear it, lowers himself into his favourite chair and picks up the newspaper.

A few minutes pass in silence, before he notices my dead gaze and puts the paper down. 'What are you staring at?' he asks.

I shrug my shoulders 'I'm watching the time tick by.'

My father is 65. I'm 27. I ask him whether he experiences time the same way I do.

'No, of course not,' he answers, as if it were a stupid question 'You've got your whole life ahead of you. You can still change trains, or just get off at another station whenever you like. I'm getting close to my last stop'.

I let his words sink in. Last stop? This is not an unfamiliar concept but today these words seem to hold more weight. In fact the very thought makes me feel anxious. Over the past weeks, while staring at the wall I have found myself giving thought to the true value of time. I ask myself questions about the life I have been living, my dreams, my responsibilities, my fears and my regrets. For perhaps the first time I start to question the path I've chosen. Ordinarily my days are filled with activity, distracting me from such topics but since my accident and consequently becoming a part of the sofa I have nothing but time. My legs are restless but there's nowhere to go. Held hostage by my broken foot while the clock mocks me from the wall.

Where have these questions and doubts come from? I really should have nothing to worry about. I live a comfortable life, full of opportunity. Opportunities I have always made the most of. I wouldn't consider myself overly ambitious by nature. However when I find things I am genuinely interested in excitement takes over and I tend to excel. When I was fifteen, I set out to get my first real job. Motivated solely by the money I took a position in the kitchen at a small tapas restaurant near my home in Haarlem in The Netherlands. To my surprise, over the course of a year I developed a real passion for cooking. Then one night at sixteen, some friends of mine took me out to a particularly high class restaurant and for the first time my eyes were opened to the world of fine dining. I had never seen or tasted anything like it and I decided on the spot I had to learn this craft. I walked straight to the kitchen and asked the Chef directly for a job. By some miracle, a position was actually available and I started immediately. Our kitchen would eventually receive a Michelin star and I continued to work in fine dining kitchens for years to come.

While cooking, I was also working through two university degrees and at the age of 24, after years with my nose glued to more books than I care to remember, I graduated with honours both as a Psychologist and a Criminologist. I even got the job I had been focused on since the day I began my studies. I was now an investigative psychologist with the Dutch National Police. I spent my days engrossed in cases of murder, sex offence and stalking. Intrigued not only by 'whodunnit' but the ever-complex process. How can you tell a true statement from false? What do you do when your prime witness is mentally ill? Or perhaps a child? How to determine the value of an alibi? And how to present questions without influencing an answer?

Not everyone understands the appeal of a job like this and with good reason, always operating in the darkest corners of society but that's exactly what appeals to me. Fascinated by the extremes of human behaviour and captivated by every case that poured over my desk. Each requiring an approach as unique as the individuals involved.

Six months ago I moved back in with my father with the intention of saving money to buy a house. A process I've actually been through before. At 19 I bought an apartment together with my then partner. I remember the feelings of pride and success. We lived the dream, fixed leaking taps, painted walls, decorated, hosted dinner parties and enjoyed the life. However, after around six years we parted amicably. We decided he would take the mortgage himself and I continued to focus on my studies.

Recently, my father and I have looked at a few different houses for sale around his neighbourhood. With a thriving career this seems like the next logical step but this time it doesn't seem to evoke the same feelings. Something is different. Something I can't yet explain. I'm starting to wonder if I might just be going through the motions.

It has been 3 weeks now since I broke my foot and the pace of life remains at a literal stand still. I continue to think, deeply. I think not only about the choices I've made with my life but my motivations for making them. Why was I compelled so strongly to go to University in the first place? And immediately after graduating, begin a full time career? Was it entirely my choice or was it simply an expectation of society? perhaps my family? or other outside influences? I wonder if I just swam with the flow without considering other options or lifestyles. Lifestyles I may not even know of.

Buying the house provokes the same questions. I'm assured by the people in my life that it is a financially responsible decision. After all, 'I need to think about the security of my future and it's not getting any cheaper' but will this just be another knot tying me down? Am I sacrificing the freedom I have to change trains? No longer able to decide where and when to get off.

And what about work. The office dictates where I need to live. The hours dictate how much I can do with my free time. I'm told exactly how much I will earn, when I can take leave and for how long. Even told what age I can retire. It all seems so structured. Predictable even. Where is the excitement of the unknown?

We have a term for this in Dutch. The golden cage. We give up our time in exchange for money. Our jobs come with benefits, our money buys us the things we want and we fall into a kind of trap

believing we have everything we need. It is a comfortable cage but it's a cage all the same. The criminally undervalued side of this transaction is our time.

This job is all I wanted for so long but now that I'm unable to work I think of all the things I look forward to doing the most when my foot is healed and it is not walking back into the office.

As time goes on I follow the rabbit hole deeper. What else have I never considered? If societal expectation can influence the direction of my career then what about the values I live by? Are even they really my own? How do people in other countries, from completely different backgrounds live? How do they consider their choices and what influences shape them? Maybe I need more perspective on life before I lock myself in a future of certainty.

I remind myself how fortunate I am to be able to even ask these questions, with the freedom to act on my decisions. Who knows, if I lived elsewhere I may not be able to change trains at all. There may not *be* any other stations. If I am lucky enough to have this freedom, don't I owe it to myself to use it?

'Dad, is this all there is?' I ask despondently. 'Work, work, work, buy a house and take a holiday from time to time?'

My father smiles. He nods in a way that tells me that he's listening, but not taking it too seriously.

'Aah yes, fallen into the old Black Hole, have you?' He uses another Dutch expression, referring to a sense of purposelessness many people feel after graduating or achieving a long term goal, even winning gold.

'Don't worry, it'll pass'.

I smile. I always appreciate his rationality and the way he challenges my opinions. Often I agree with him but now I can't help but shake my head. It is understandable for him to dismiss this as just a phase but this time he couldn't be more wrong. It is something much more powerful, much

deeper. The longer I sit on this couch, the stronger the desire grows to turn my life upside down and inside out. To hold it by the ankles, shake it out and start again.

Head or heart

Another week rolls by and the whole time I contemplate a now simplified question: How can I make sure I squeeze everything out of life and not allow life to squeeze everything out of me?

I surf the internet in search of inspiration. My attention no longer fixed on the wall, I watch videos and read blogs written by globetrotters and adventurers. Some approach their days with no plan, visiting exotic places bouncing from one experience to the next on a whim. Others on arduous journeys with purpose, enduring the elements in extreme conditions but both prioritising their passion. Unbound by schedule they live entirely in the moment allowing fate a greater voice in their story. Whether you consider them inspirational or irresponsible, adventurers or aimless wanderers their stories speak to me. Seeing others conducting their own experiments on how a life can be lived comforts me in a way and I wonder; Could I do this too?

Through all of the innocent excitement the rational side of me does not sit back idly. It is always there, waiting for a gap in the conversation. 'Wait a minute' it says. Ok, travelling is fun but you've worked so hard for this job, for this existence. What's the plan? Follow your heart on some whimsical adventure? Then what? If you go too far you may not be able to come back. Why are you so dissatisfied anyway?'

A legitimate question. Why can't I just be happy with everything I have? *Is* this just a phase? Am I being greedy, Am I just bored?

'Dad, am I overreacting? Are these feelings really just a predictable part of life? Is this "black hole" really harmless?

From my studies in Psychology, I know all too well that our thinking is fallible. Particularly when emotions are involved. Should I listen to my rational side or do the words of my heart hold just as much weight?

My father allows a moment of silence to pass before offering me a modest solution. 'If it's adventure you want, can't you go out into the dunes?' Though obviously not convinced of the gravity of my predicament my father still responds in a genuine, caring tone. He always has. His instinct always to keep a level head and help me to make rational decisions as a good role model and father should. I will always appreciate this, even if this time it's not quite what I'd like to hear.

'The National Park is just around the corner. You can get away from the city any time you like. This lack of freedom is just in your head.'

'National Park' I scoff. Our tiny 'national park' is so over managed that I'm not even allowed in after sunset. I can't camp there, can't make a fire, it's illegal to pick herbs. It is a museum exhibit of nature, behind a velvet rope, subject to strict museum rules. 'No, dad. I think I need to get away... Far away.'

The conversation fades. I look at my father, his expression equal parts of sympathy and confusion. I know he wants to say something to make it all better but what would that be? I don't even know myself. And at that, Silence falls over the Valkenier home.

It's not like I've never travelled, in fact I have always felt like my holidays were the focal point of the year. I'd have my annual leave organised quite literally for January first and take off for as long as I could. I'd ride my motorbike through the Alps and the Pyrenees, through the Eifel and up and down to Budapest. I'd visit friends all over Europe and in recent times increasingly further abroad to

China, to South Africa, Colombia. I've never felt homesick and never felt like I'd seen enough. On the contrary, I wanted more! Further, wilder and for longer. After a few weeks it would be time to return. I would reluctantly check in for my flight home, grateful to at least return to a job I love but focused on societies dramatically imbalanced ratio of work to play. By the time I landed I'd have a long list of dreams for the next trip, I'd just have to wait another year.

Well, not this time.

Seven weeks in and my plaster is replaced by a moon boot and crutches. I feel like I've consumed a lifetime of wonderful stories. Each one continues to strengthen my conviction and my excitement is only matched by my growing impatience. It is clear now: I need a break. Not a 2 week holiday but a real break. I want to experience the world. I want to see things I've never seen before and go wherever it takes me. I don't want to live the way I'm 'supposed to' anymore, I want to give up the illusion of certainty and the control I've been taught to hold so dear. To live fully, live deliberately, and experience richness beyond the material.

There's only one potential cost. Everything I've worked for...

I can feel my rational side trying to take over again but as I look out at my fathers concreted backyard from the dining table I see small blades of grass pushing up between the narrow cracks. Forcing their way out of the dark and into the sunlight. Defying the barrier put down to squash their spirit and I hear the world calling me again, louder than ever: 'Tamar, come out and play!'

The first step

I take a deep breath to build confidence. It doesn't work... I grip my crutches a little tighter and slowly hobble towards my boss' office.

'Welcome back Tamar!' 'We've missed you around here'

*Gulp

After exchanging pleasantries but before I can give myself an excuse to back out I jump straight to the point. 'Ehmm, I want to take a year off... Do you think there is any chance you could make that happen?'

This man, and indeed the whole police department have supported me incredibly well in the past. They have organised specialised training, allowed me to attend any conference or workshop I desired, even sent me to America to spend a summer studying with the FBI.

He looks at me with understandable surprise.

'Have a seat Tamar'

*Gulp

'What's going on? You are happy here aren't you? Things are going so well'

I nod. He's right. Things *are* going well. I love it here.

I proceed to tell him the truth. I try to explain my entire thought process from start to finish. He listens carefully. He has recognised my restlessness and lets say 'enthusiasm' for holidays over the years. He asks me a handful of follow up questions but ultimately understands. He is a psychologist after all and a good man who genuinely cares about the wellbeing of his team.

'All right, I'll see what I can do'

Relieved at the completion of step one I return home that evening and chat with my father over dinner.

'Maybe I'll travel by bicycle'.

My father raises an eyebrow 'Oh yeah?'

He holds his expression of valid scepticism. Cycle touring is not a topic that has come up around this dinner table. My experience on a bicycle is limited to running errands in the city and he knows this well.

I attempt to explain all the good things about an activity I only know from the stories I've been reading and I'm sure it shows. Practical experience aside though, the freedom, the physical challenge and time in the outdoors all sound very appealing to me.

'You must mean a motorbike?' he says with a smirk.

I shake my head "Turtles can tell you more about the road than hares" to quote Khalil Gibran 'On the motorbike you race past everything. In fact the faster the better but not this time. On a bicycle there is much more time to absorb your surroundings, time to make a friend, to have a chat, to smell a flower. This trip is not a quick adrenaline fix. It should be an experience for all the senses.'

I continue to present my under-researched and over-excited case to my dubious father.

'It's much cheaper and I'm not tied to gas stations or asphalt. Maybe I'll cycle all the way to Singapore!'

He doesn't stop me, he just smiles and continues to eat his dinner.

A few long days of anxiously waiting for an answer from my boss go by and I get the call to his office.

'Good news, Tamar,' he exclaims as he pours us both a coffee. There is triumph in his voice and the butterflies in my stomach start to calm

'You've been approved for six months of leave.'

The room falls silent. As his good news hits me, I'm lost for words, almost paralyzed and the reality confronts me all at once. The whole time I was waiting for his answer, in fact the entire time I've been processing these thoughts I was not even considering a return. I was planning my new life.

'Oh' is all I manage to say 'Thank... Thank you'

I leave my confused boss and hobble even slower than usual back to my office and pull the door shut behind me.

Six months. I acknowledge that this is incredibly generous especially for someone in my position, in fact for anyone who is part of a team but I just don't feel the celebration. How far can I cycle in six months? Will I make it out of Europe? How long can I stay to explore if I find somewhere I enjoy? I could stay for months in Italy alone. Do I have time to accept invitations? To learn new skills, to get where I'm going, or more importantly: get lost? I can already imagine the countdown in my head.

Four months left, tick tock three months to go, tick tock your final weeks and all of a sudden 'TIME'S UP'. Back to the golden cage..' back to work, back to structure. Back to the exact position I am currently in.

Six months will not do. Now the reality is clear, ANY time frame is too limiting. There is nothing else to do. Only if I resign can I achieve what I want to achieve: true freedom.

'Tamar, I don't get it,' my father tries again. 'You've worked so hard for this. What are you running away from?' He tries to speak calmly but now he cannot hide the discomfort and concern in his voice with the realisation that this phase has not gone away.

'I'm not running from anything Dad'

I've never considered this an exercise in running away. I see myself running towards something.

Toward adventure, inspiration, freedom and a fresh perspective on life.

As I defend my decision I notice that he is giving an external voice to the same doubts and concerns of my own and pretty soon its internal accomplice begins to speak up. What do I actually know about

cycling? Or solo trips, especially of this length. I've never left my bubble for longer than a 5 week holiday. Will I get lonely? I'm going to get lonely, What happens if I get lonely?

I block out the voice. I can't doubt myself anymore. I sit down and look my father in the eyes.

'Dad, I'm not going to be able to explain this. I don't fully understand it myself but I can't help feeling that life has so much more to offer. I have to explore that, even if it means giving up the contents of this life to date.

I leave him, sadly without the comfort he wants. I don't know how to offer it, all I know is on my deathbed, I don't want to think about all the things I wanted to do; I want to be exhausted from the life I lived.

Retiring at 28

All great adventures must begin somewhere. Mine begins here. It is January 2015 at the age of 28 I announce that I am retiring early. I have just quit my job.

With mixed emotions I break the news to my colleagues and tearfully try to answer the obvious questions. Why? Where will you go? When will you return? I have no answers and stumble over my words as I unconvincingly attempt to explain my future. I feel terrible, it feels like I am abandoning them but they deserve better than a teammate who is not fully committed. I console myself with this fact and with the word now out I feel a great weight lifted. Together we decide that my final day of work will be in three months' time and with that, the preparations begin.

Fortunately, I don't have a whole lot to give up. There is no house to take care of since I moved back in with my father and in a weird stroke of luck my motorbike was stolen recently. Not a great outcome in itself but it just happened to be the first motorbike I ever fully insured. Considering the relative spontaneity of this trip, I could certainly use the money. I was devastated when I lost it but now I feel almost a sense of validation. Like the universe is on my side.

I stare at my bank balance and think about potential expenses. I am willing to leave at any cost but with my departure surprising even myself, I have not saved a penny. Everything will have to be done cheaply. After all an open ended trip like this really has no calculatable cost. At least what I have will allow me to organise a bike. I can start the trip and worry about money later.

I commence the biggest spring clean of my life. I make two piles. One with everything I want to take with me and one that has to stay behind.

By lunchtime I have 5 piles... Now there is a rubbish pile, a pile of things to give away and towering above all 4, the 'maybe' pile.

'Dad, look at all of this!'

I've never considered myself materialistic, but I stand in awe looking at the mountain of stuff I've accumulated over the years. Some useful, some special to me but almost all is replaceable and most does not enrich my life in any meaningful way. I want to free myself of that too. So I get to work and before long I've whittled things down to the bare essentials and admittedly a few too many sentimental items.

'Dad, can I store these in your basement?'

Tinker Queen

A colleague offers me a cheap mountain bike frame. I jump on the offer. There is something comforting about collecting inexpensive parts. If it all gets too hard or I change my mind I can just get rid of the bike and do something else. At least less reluctantly than if I were to buy something brand new. Another side benefit is that I'll have to build the bike myself. I will be forced to understand my steed intimately. I still have two months to create something travel-worthy, but the next and most obvious problem is that I know almost nothing about bikes. I need help.

I walk into Bike planet in Haarlem with my new frame in hand. I shuffle up to the counter and introduce myself to the ever-friendly John

'What are you going to do?' he checks that he has heard me correctly.

'Cycle to Singapore? Ok, ah, With that?!' He points to the piece of a bike sitting on the floor beside me.

'Um yes' I stammer, 'Well, that's why I need your help. I don't have much of a budget, maybe you guys have some spare parts lying around?'

He looks at me from head to toe and probably out of curiosity alone he decides to entertain the situation, 'I'll see what I've got.' Half of John disappears into a large bin of loose parts. I see only his bare legs sticking out as he fishes out one part after another. I notice his giant calf muscles and hope these are not mandatory for what I'm about to undertake. Finally he reappears with two rims and a bundle of spokes. 'Here, you can have these for ten bucks, start with that.'

So I do, and armed with a laptop and toolbox in my fathers garage, I prepare for my first-ever bike building experience. I'm going to attempt to assemble a wheel. I patched tire tubes before, but that's about the limit of my knowledge. Fortunately, in this golden age of internet there are plenty of videos online for me to consult and it gives me confidence.

My father watches from the doorway, shaking his head as the white collar, academic plods away, hands black with grease. 'Do it yourself, eh?' he remarks, 'nothing's changed. Those were among the first words you ever spoke!'

A week later I'm back at John's. I've brought croissants and coffee and I proudly present my creation to the boys in the workshop. They burst into laughter. 'You put them in all wrong!'

Back to the garage... More practice I guess and over the following weeks there would be plenty more. I learn to adjust gears, bleed brakes. I install cranks and a bottom bracket. My bike gets a sturdy rack, a set of panniers, a ladies saddle and a big red bell. Croissants and coffee turn into Friday night drinks and gradually I build a bond with John, his team and my new bike that I still haven't ridden.

Test Ride

Time flies. It is now March and in two weeks I plan to depart. About time I took my bike for a test ride. From Haarlem to Amsterdam is the order, 21 kilometres seems like a good distance to start and I'll stop by 'The Vakantiefietser', a store in Amsterdam that specialises in long-distance bicycle tours. I can look for a few second opinions and even pick up anything I haven't considered.

In good spirits I set off. I cycle a beautiful green route, greeting the rabbits as they dart in front of my wheels. Pedalling gleefully along I wonder why I've never cycled to Amsterdam before. Until a handful of kilometres in it becomes painfully clear. Cycling is hard! Drenched in sweat and gasping for oxygen, I arrive at the shop. It has taken me an hour and a half and I'm absolutely beat. I act cool and try my best to hide my legs buckling as I dismount. Jelly legged I enter the shop and wander the aisles while I catch my breath. Once I can talk again I spend some time chatting to the staff about my bike and my plans. I expected to recover in this time but I am still so exhausted when I leave that I have to put my bike on the train to get home. Another 21 kilometres is simply out of the question.

Suitably ashamed, I spent the next half hour staring out the window. What do I do now? At the shop they didn't exactly take me seriously. They bombarded me with terminology I've never heard and items I have never heard of but apparently can't live without. A Rohloff hub? A bike computer? Clipless pedals? Aren't my pedals already clipless? There are cycling shorts, cycling glasses, shoes. Do I really need a satellite phone?

Any confidence I'd developed is quickly squashed. I don't have any of the right gear and apparently I can't cycle either.

And then there is this advice, which I don't know what to do with: 'Make sure you don't stay away for more than a year, or you'll never be able to ground yourself again.'

Don't take life too seriously

I have been described as a lot of things in the past but never as athletic or strong. I have travelled alone and also camped in the wild, but cycling with the weight of all my possessions, food, water and a tent is quite something else. Have I put all my eggs in the basket of something I am completely unsuited for?

'Nonsense,' says Janneke, when I share my doubts with her. 'You can adapt to anything, can't you? Remember what Pippi Longstocking says? "I have never done that before, so I'm sure I can do it."' Janneke makes me laugh and I add a quote from Kermit the Frog "Don't take life too seriously. It's not like you're going to get out alive anyways." Somehow this works to give me confidence. 'You're right,' I say. 'And a lack of talent never stopped me before.' On top of this I've already told the world that I'm going on a major trip and the risk of losing face is a powerful motivator.

I can at least try, right? If it doesn't work out, I'll just turn around.

It's now or never, I need to leave as soon as possible. While the wisdom of childhood cartoon characters is strong.

A little longer together

I haul the last few items to the basement. To get there, I have to enter Janneke's domain. She is my best friend and rents the bottom floor apartment in my father's house.

'Tamar, how about I cycle with you to Belgium?' She proposes as she helps me carry a box down the stairs.

Really? That would be amazing!" my excitement pauses abruptly. 'But how? On your grandma bike?

You don't even have gears!'

'What does that matter?', she responds nonchalantly. 'You and I, just a few more days together.'

I look at her with a big smile and drop the box to hug her. I hadn't expected it but I'm so glad to hear it I could cry. A few more days together is comforting and it's all I focus on. I'm still not entirely ready to think about what comes next.

The next day I watch Janneke prepare. She doesn't have a bike computer, a Rohloff hub or clip pedals either, I'm not sure if she even has brakes but she doesn't care. She stuffs some warm clothes into a plastic bag and straps it all to a flimsy rack over the back wheel. I however, lay out everything on the floor in front of me and proceed to go over it all again. One pannier for camping gear, one pannier for clothes, one pannier for my cooking gear and food. The necessities are packed and in the extra space I squeeze in a small chess set, some candles and a harmonica. The rest I will get rid of. A new chapter with a clean slate.

Departure

"Grandiose and compelling I want to live!" are the words with which H. Marsman begins his poem *The graybeard and the youngling*. My father, the graybeard, and I, the youngling, have often read the poem together and it is the following sentence that has always stuck with me: 'Only a heart that beats against its own ribs is a pure heart on a pure beat.' I never quite understood exactly what Marsman meant by it, but always took it as an exhortation to pursue my dreams. I think about that now on the day Janneke and I are leaving.

It is March 28, 2015 and we are standing outside in the rain at my father's doorstep. Janneke with her granny bike, adorned with garbage bags will ride with me as far as the Belgian border. After that, I will continue on my own. For how long? Where to? Why? I still don't really know but I can feel the sense of freedom. Free from schedules and deadlines, from obligations and possessions. I still find it terrifying but I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

My father looks at us, his eyes full of love and sadness at the same time. It is as if he wants to say something, but swallows it away. There is nothing more to say, anyway. Be careful? Stay away from strange men?

It is the end of winter, it is cold and the rain is pouring down. My father wraps his warm vest tightly around him, as if holding himself now that he has to let go of me. He looks at me with sorrow and the

drops of rain merge with both our tears. I will miss him terribly but I can't let that stop me. I have to go. I don't know where but the alternative is no longer an option. I hope he understands that.

I would like to say 'see you soon,' but I would be lying. I have no idea how long I'll be gone. A few weeks? Months? Maybe years? I tell him how much I love him and hold him tightly for a while longer until he pushes me away. 'Just go.', he whispers.

A feeling of panic overwhelms me the instant he lets go. I don't want to leave anymore. I want to walk back inside and drink tea in the warm house with him. My whole body shakes from intense crying and I can barely see through the tears. 'Come, Tamar,' Janneke says softly and she puts her feet on the pedals. I take one last look at my father, do the same and we set off into the grey. Out of the street, away from everything I know and en route to the total unknown.