

# Sitting Next to a Stranger



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to a  
Stranger

Eline Vedder

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*For Lieke*



*The more I think it over,  
the more I feel that there is nothing more truly artistic  
than to love people.*

Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother





## Gray

Nothing in front of me excited me. Not the suits in the first row, the monotone voices filling the room in this lifeless office, and most certainly not the PowerPoint presentation and People in Gray Clothes discussing a bright future. A future for who? I wanted to scream, but I kept quiet and focused on important matters: What was happening outside?

People on Museum Square were waiting for the traffic lights to catch a tram. It started to rain, and the restaurant staff got their tables inside. A couple on the grass lawns of the square did not mind the approaching rainfall or the low temperature. They moved, but only toward each other.

I had sketched this scene before, with different people. The sketch was in my notebook. The title was *Ignoring the World*. I lay there too, sometimes. I would clutch my elbows and watch the brightness of the blue sky and the green of the leaves. It never did justice to Vincent Van Gogh's *Almond Blossom*, but it was the only thing I could do when the government decided that the cultural sector was not significant enough to remain open in lockdown.

If the leaves on the actual trees weren't there, I imagined them flourishing. If the temperature was too low, I imagined a warm day. I wrapped my scarf around my neck and pretended a glowing sun warmed my face. If the sky was

not bright, I wiped away the clouds like erasing them from a canvas. My favorite painting appeared, and I felt calm.

I saved one unfinished sketch of *Ignoring the World* in the notebook I used at the office. The first pages consisted of information about the team's structure: the team's role within the department, within the business unit, within the European scope, and within the global scope. My sketch was on the page after that. On another page, I wrote my five-year goals and development points that my manager and I discussed during a one-on-one meeting. Apparently, I had to focus on strategic career decisions. And then there were the communication strategies, the highlights and takeaway points of a brainstorm session, and more stodgy things I had to send newsletters about, and I couldn't anymore, and I just—

"Nora." The department lead's voice jolted my mind to where my body was.

"Yes," I said, unaware of why. The people who were not using their laptops looked at me expectantly. I got up and peeked over my shoulder. The potential painting outside had disappeared. People on Museum Square rushed toward the weekend. Van Gogh had his circular patterns to add movement to his pieces. I used to add speed to my canvases by lifting the brush a fraction of a second faster.

The light outside was splendid too; I had to capture it.

"Nora?" she asked again.

"I can't find my paintbrush—my notes, I mean," I said as I rushed to the front of the room. I had to talk about what the merger of our company with an American investor meant for our team.

"We will use the strength of each individual. Everyone will have their expertise," I clarified. Expertise was good; don't try too many things at once,

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focus, and be strategic. The words echoed through my mind in different voices, with a conviction I must have copy-pasted.

“We found our unicorns. The team is complete,” I concluded. I tried to hide my relief.

I had started taking on tasks from my new role, while still working on graphic design tasks. It had been an intense year, but it was an investment in myself and my career, after all. What an opportunity. New position. More responsibilities. I had earned it. I’d be foolish to say no to this career move. The previous manager was home indefinitely. The team was expanded by two positions, and money had been invested in communication about mental health. We could do yoga in the office or call a help desk if the fire in us waned and burnout was looming. What an opportunity. Where was my joy?

“What are your thoughts on the coming months?” asked a person I sometimes got some weak, tasteless coffee with.

I shared what I had imprinted in my head. The team’s strengths: We are ready; larger projects are possible; we are sticking together for a bright future; we accept the challenge. And whatnot.

“Anything is possible,” I said. “I started as an intern and have been in the company for more than four years.” My cheeks hurt from the smile I practiced in front of the mirror every morning.

I returned to my chair and focused on the crucial things. I could still go to the Van Gogh Museum when we wrapped up. I missed my favorite painting.

The streetlights outside lit up when the manager reached the end of her presentation. She left the slide with the organizational chart open. My headshot had moved up a spot on the chart. I didn’t like the woman in the picture, but I couldn’t escape her. She also stared at me in the mirror every morning and had soaked in all the colors she surrounded herself with.

The organizational chart disappeared, but a new slide filled the room. We were about to dive into effectiveness, improving productivity, and cutting costs. NPS, KPI, ROI. We had to discuss the whole alphabet before EOD, and all I wanted was to Get Out Of Here.

“I wish we were drinking champagne, instead of talking about how much we sold,” I said to my colleague Sofia. We had built some sort of office friendship. She was lively and we spoke English together. She dressed Gray too, but I did not consider her a part of the Gray people.

“Let’s drink,” she whispered, although no one would blame her for speaking everyone’s thoughts out loud. “We have to stick it out for this part,” she said, clearly not excited about it. “We can go to a bar after that. Did you go to People First to sign the contract?”

“I haven’t had time yet,” I said. I was not lying, but I had not scheduled it in my calendar either. I wanted the week of networking events to be over. I wanted to go home and get out of this tight white blouse that was choking me. I wanted my black jeans, boots, and a T-shirt with a band logo on it. I wanted to rush home, change clothes, return to the Van Gogh Museum, break in, and spend the evening alone. Green and blue make gray, yet I experienced the color spectrum when I looked at *Almond Blossom*.

The square below my workplace had turned into a jungle of bicycles. I tried to find the fake tulips I had wrapped around the handlebars. They functioned as a reminder of where I parked my bike and were once blooming with bright plastic pink leaves. The only two plastic leaves left in this first week of January were contaminated with dirt.

The happy tune from a video started playing on the room’s big screen. We made the video to celebrate the rebranding of the company. I had made the final edits. The loud sounds forced my detail-oriented mind to focus on the minutiae of the inconsequential.

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Why do *People from the Office* talk about Things from the Office after working hours? I turned around and squeezed myself between the bar tables, empty glasses, and suits to the exit. That was the plan. But my colleague from People First was walking this way. She was leafing through a stack of papers that I knew the contents of. It was my contract. Sign it. Today.

The path to the exit was blocked by small talk, office gossip I had no interest in, colleagues who were getting too buzzed, and a contract I kept running away from. I grabbed one of the half-empty champagne glasses from the table. The logo of our brand, that I designed, was on the glasses. I spilled the remaining contents on the floor before the People First colleague looked at me.

“There you are. Will you come over and sign?” she asked, ticking her finger on the folder that contained my contract.

I held the empty glass upside down and, completely sober, giggled that it was my third.

“Champagne First. There’s no problem signing when I’m tipsy, is there?” I spoke louder than I normally did, and two compliance colleagues were standing in the circle with us. My colleague looked on edge, and I didn’t know if that was intended to be ironic. I felt guilty for my little act but did not regret it.

“We’ll do it on Monday,” she said as she lifted her eyebrow and put the contract back with the others. “I will send you a meeting invitation.”

*People from the Office* talked about things going on in their lives: digital money, investment, Bitcoin, and the housing market.

This freaking housing market, I thought. There was one bright spot in the coming months: I could rent a studio of my own. Like many others, I had been

on a waiting list for social renting for almost ten years and something had finally become available. It was a small studio, but that was all I needed. Private renting, let alone buying, was light years away from me. It would be possible if I moved in with a partner or became part of the Gray Suits.

The Gray Suits discussed buying bigger apartments; one colleague showed off his new watch, and the others were impressed.

“I really want to go,” I said, staring into my glass of champagne. No one heard me. I wondered if I had just moved my lips, silently voicing my internal thoughts. I held the glass by the base and made circles with it. I circled more and created a waterspout in the glass, until a drop of champagne spilled out. It landed on the ugly felt floor.

“I must go,” I said again, looking at the champagne stain.

The Gray Suits kept talking.

“You and your wife are two-income earners, you should find something,” a voice said to another Gray Suit. They spoke about wanting to have children, about having children. About sleepless nights. If I had to give it a painting title, it would be *Whatever*.

“What about you, Nora?” one of them asked. I was unsure who he was, but he looked similar to a picture on our corporate intranet. “You must be sick of the dating scene. Are you still living in that student flat?”

I wanted to shout until my lungs hurt: I DON'T CARE. And: YES, DATING IS FUN, IT INSPIRES ME. MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, GRAY WHATEVER. But when I opened my mouth, a pleasing answer flew out.

Over the years, I learned how to control this urge to make noise. All I had to do was close my eyes. I went to a dark room in my mind where I could scream as loud as I wanted. It allowed me to scream, shout, and yell before the

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dark room turned into a calm park with almond trees. It was a trick I had invented for special occasions but relied on multiple times a day lately.

I used my trick, removed myself from the conversation, and someone bumped into me when the dark room in my head turned into Vincent Van Gogh's *Almond Blossom*. It was a colleague who looked like the representative of *People from the Office*. He did not apologize but picked up the champagne glass I had just strategically emptied, stared at it, looked disappointed, got a new one, and drank it like a shot. His body circled like my champagne glass had done.

"If the housing market was not upside-down, I bet I would not be with my partner and would live alone," he said before bursting out laughing. No one knew if he was serious and two colleagues stepped away from him.

"Anyway," one of the colleagues said to Sofia, trying to change the topic. "Are you excited to go to Mexico again?"

"I really want to leave," I said at precisely the same time.

"To Mexico?" Sofia asked me. She took my wrist in her hands and got an exhilarated look in her eyes.

"Me? Mexico? No. That's dangerous. No." I shook my head.

"It's more than just that. You should go before you move into the new apartment." She squeezed my wrist and her eyes got bigger. "You should join me. I love my Mexican family but they are so traditional. I would love for you to join us. Or anyone."

"It's really too dangerous to go there," I said again. "I don't even speak Spanish."

"Tacos and tequilas. People searching to find themselves," the representative of *People from the Office* commented. He seemed impressed by his sense of humor that no one else could spot. "Go find yourselves, girls," he said, making two pistols with his hands and imitating shooting into the ceiling.

Sofia looked at him disapprovingly and we took a step away from the group. Our drunk colleague was making *puf, puf, puf* sounds.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.

“Please.” I put my hands together, looked up at the ceiling, and slightly bent my knees. “Where should we go?”

“Where we always go to, where else?” Sofia said. “They have special margaritas on Friday. I can’t wait for another month.”

We received a “see you Monday” and congratulations on my new position. Someone handed me a bottle of champagne from one of our clients before we escaped from the gray walls.

The sharp, frigid wind brought tears to my eyes. It felt more alive than anything I had encountered this week. With the raindrops on my glasses and two tears escaping from under them, I searched for the pink plastic tulips that accented my bike crate. I began to doubt that I had seen them an hour ago. After several rounds, I gave up and accepted the truth that someone had stolen my bike.

Sofia and other colleagues approached on their bikes and rang their bells.

“The last flowers have died for good,” I said ponderously, referring to the plastic tulips. Sofia was the only one who listened, and she looked confused. I shared the less dramatic version with her, and we agreed that I would meet them at the bar.

“Don’t let a great day be ruined by a stolen bike,” she said. She offered me a ride, but I declined.

“I’ll take public transport.” I wanted to listen to my go-to song and have a break from the Gray people before we would all meet in the bar again.

The Gray people and Sofia rang their bicycle bells several more times as they cycled away. It sounded like an alarm trying to wake up. I could not create a painting concept for this scene; no painting titles emerged.

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The cold of the metal bench of the bus stop pierced through my slacks. I could stand up, move my legs, and rub my hands to get warmer. I could do all those things, but leaned against the glass to feel the cold through my winter coat on my back. It confirmed that I was present at this bus stop, because I had drifted away from this minute, this evening, this week, this year, and this city. But I could not drift away; I had riveting plans.

This room I sometimes went to in my mind, the black one with almond blossom trees, had small speakers hanging in every corner. The speakers were turned off when I entered the room screaming. Once I'd envisioned myself letting go of my rage, and the calmness surfaced, the speakers turned on and started with the song it had on repeat. It was the same song I used to lock out the sounds of the city, which was exactly what I wanted to do on this ice-cold metal bench. I put on my headphones, and Mick Jagger, from my favorite band, the Rolling Stones, began to sing.

If I could be calm and safe under the *Almond Blossom*, I could travel and dream through his voice. Those were the gateways to everything I needed without leaving the city that was my world. I had always dead seriously asked myself: Who needs to leave home when you can travel like that? Lately, the question seemed to transform into a rhetorical one, and I had started to answer myself sarcastically.

"Who needs to leave home when the Stones and Van Gogh are at my fingertips?"

"Not me," I'd say to myself, leaving any chance of danger at arm's length.

The music didn't manage to block the city's sound out like it normally did. Tram bells and bicycles rang; chatter came from the line at the Concert Building. A different kind of chatter reached me from the street corner at one of the pubs. I turned up the volume, and the music got a boost when a strange voice joined my world. I looked around, baffled, to see it coming from a man

beside me. The light of the advertisement made it possible to see his posture. He stepped out of the corner and sang my favorite line of “Ruby Tuesday.” I had not realized my music was so loud. I turned it lower to look at my screen instead of someone I did not know.

“Don’t turn it off,” he said calmly. I did not look up but paused the song. My fingers followed the cable of my headphones. The end didn’t connect to my phone but hung loosely beside my pocket. I felt ashamed when I realized I had played music out loud and quickly put the cable into my phone to continue listening to my go-to song. I listened to it two more times before the bus arrived.

People pressed themselves through the entrance of the overcrowded bus. I sank next to the window, and the man from the bus stop sat across from me.

“You look sad for someone carrying a bottle of champagne,” he said. He handed me the bottle I took from the office and I realized I had forgotten it outside. I thanked him without meeting his glance and held the bottle tightly with one hand. We continued the journey to the other side of the city, where Gray people collected in the bar every Friday afternoon.

I drew a square on the fogged window and stared through it. A car and two bicycles wanted to enter the same street simultaneously. A delivery van and tourists in front of a vintage store blocked the narrow street. The streets had become tourist spots and a hub for the latest trends. I could draw this if I found time this weekend. But I had drawn this last winter and the winter before. I pressed replay to fight the boredom of the familiar scene, and Mick’s voice calmed me with a song that allowed me to drift away. I drifted until the bus stopped abruptly. The champagne bottle fell.

The man handed me the bottle for the second time. I forced myself to stare into his eyes and saw a familiar face.

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“He’s the museum guard,” I thought out loud. If the museum was my second house and *Almond Blossom* a warm blanket, he was my flatmate. He worked as a guard in the Van Gogh Museum. We had not exchanged more than a nod over the years. Sometimes, we looked at the same painting. I was in front of it, which felt like lying under it. He looked at it from the entrance of the next hall.

**Title:** Almond Blossom

**Date:** 1890

**Technique:** Oil on canvas

**Dimensions:** 73.5cm x 92cm

**Artist:** Vincent Van Gogh

Whenever I walked past the guard, it was invariably accompanied by a kind nod. It was an essential part of my routine. Occasionally, I wanted to talk to him and ask about the paintings or anything at all.

I never did; I didn’t know him. But he was in one of my sketches: *Museum Guard in Van Gogh*. I did not remember where I stored it.

I got rhapsodic thinking about his workplace but awkward from the thought of having to talk to someone. I jumped up and sank into the bus seat simultaneously, making a high, meaningless sound. I felt safer talking to him, knowing we had something in common. Talk. Talk. Words. I wanted to look through the ten-centimeter gateway to the city, but the fog was back on the glass. I played with the transparent wrapping paper and ribbons around the champagne bottle and pressed pause on my phone screen. The presence of the people on the bus became apparent. People pressing. Knees against knees. Shoulders against shoulders. I wanted to continue listening to my song, but

starting a conversation could lead to information about the current Van Gogh exhibitions.

“Do you ...,” I started carefully. He looked at me, and I realized I had never looked him in his eyes, although we had seen the same painting. “Do you work in the museum?” I asked, looking for confirmation about something I knew. His kind smile confirmed that I asked the right question and I relaxed before I became tense again. He showed me his badge. It did not mention his name, so *Museum Guard in Van Gogh* continued being *Museum Guard in Van Gogh*. I could not replace the painting title I previously gave him with his real name. It was an option to ask for his name, but that felt too intrusive.

I left my work badge in the pocket of my coat, it did not contain interesting information. I put my hand in my pocket to toy with it and the corners of it stung my palms.

“I haven’t seen you in a long time. Were you out of town?” *Museum Guard* asked.

“Me? Definitely not. I never leave,” I explained. The bus made a sharp turn, pushing me against the window. It gave me an excuse to end this one-minute interaction, but against my instincts, I asked a question back.

“Are there new exhibitions in the museum?” I would have known this if I had still been visiting every week.

“We have a great exhibition of Vincent’s paintings from when he spent years abroad. It’s Van Gogh in Auvers,” he explained. “It was one of his most fruitful times, painting-wise. *The Church at Auvers* is in it.”

I knew that painting from pictures. Imagining seeing it in real life relaxed me.

“I can’t wait to go see it with my own eyes. I might go tomorrow. But I have plans. On Sunday I need to do some training for the coming months, I do not have time during office hours. And then it’s Monday, and I want to see it

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myself but I can't, and I should just live with my headphones on and know that *Almond Blossom* is always there so I don't need to paint myself, but I just cannot. I don't ... I just—" I suddenly stopped and gripped the badge in my pocket more firmly than before, feeling the corners of the plastic key to the office leave an imprint in my hands. I had used all the words I had in me and felt like an empty tube of paint that you keep on squeezing.

"I'm so sorry. I talk too much."

"We will show the exhibition for six months, you will see it," he said. He made a reassuring gesture with his hands. "What did you say about the Rolling Stones? I know the song you had on at the bus stop."

I had not listened to another song since we left Museum Square, but I did not tell him that.

"Are you a fan too?" I asked.

"Not particularly, but I know their songs," he answered.

The bus slowed down and people got off. I could get off here too, walk to my destination, and get out of the conversation. But the empty paint tube felt restocked.

"But you're a fan," I stated for him.

"I know some of their songs," he said. "What about you?"

"Mick puts five vowels in the word 'I,' he has a way of using his voice that has nothing to do with the lyrics. He's like ... like ..." I searched for the right words, suddenly having too many of them. "He's all over the place with his voice, changing his direction within a song. I want that. The last syllable feels like an adventure. 'Ruby Tuesday' is about this adventurous woman."

"We all live our adventures," he said.

I thought about all the adventures I was not living. The favorite line of the song was about catching dreams before it was too late. It was too late for me, but it was OK.

Most of the passengers had gotten off, and I could move to a chair where no one else sat like I normally did. I did not, but put the champagne bottle on the empty chair next to me.

“What’s the reason for the celebration?” *Museum Guard* pointed to the small card around the bottleneck.

“It is for the final merger of our office and my promotion.” I felt like an empty painting tube again. *Museum Guard* congratulated me.

“I don’t want it,” I finally admitted. “Or maybe I do. I don’t know. I need to know. But I don’t. I need a plan. I have one, but I hate it. I don’t know.”

I had not said those words out loud before, and was now throwing them in the public space. That was dangerous.

“You know what they say?” *Museum Guard* said.

“Do they have a song about a promotion at a corporation? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t mean the Stones.”

“Who else is there?” I asked.

“Always follow your intuition, that’s what people say. What does your intuition tell you?”

There was a thin line between listening to my gut or being irresponsible and I did not know on which side of the line I existed. If my intuition had the answer, I needed to schedule a meeting with Miss Intuition. I wanted to discuss the process of my life and go through guidelines I’d lost along the way.

“Absolutely nothing.”

The bus stopped another five times before I had to get off.

“I have to go.” I said it for the fourth time this evening, but this was the moment I wanted to stay. I wanted to keep listening to things I cared about, with someone who pointed me into the right direction.

“Thank you,” I whispered before I got off.

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I took a deep breath of the cold air outside, and ignored my zeal for music. It calmed down, like champagne bubbles in a bottle that was open for too long. It took two streets, three near collisions with cyclists, and a maneuver through a sidewalk café to get to the bar.

All Gray Suits were there. I walked inside and waited in the hallway of the bar. If Sofia was not here, I would go home and open the bottle of champagne on the couch. But I had to be social. Networking is part of it. Be nice. Where is the ...

“I forgot the champagne on the bus,” I whimpered dramatically. I fell to the ground with my hands reaching for the coatrack. Not the champagne ...

Sofia walked into the hallway. I quickly got up, swept the dust off my slacks, hung my coat and cleaned my fogged glasses. I saw my red cheeks in the hallway mirror.

“Did you run here?” she asked. She hugged me and asked if I was really OK. I said a nonexistent word but reassured her by holding her tighter.

“I just forgot the champagne bottle. That’s all. Really.”

“Don’t worry, we have tequila shots.” She took my hand and led me to the others.

The weekend started like it always did. We had been waiting for it as we did every week, again and again. I took the tequila and washed it down with a beer. Typical beer glasses in Amsterdam were just 200 milliliters, even though beer was integrated into our culture. They were small for a practical reason: The beer won’t get tepid. Easy, functional, and typically Dutch. Everything made sense here.

And suddenly, it was Monday. One of the enormous computer screens on my desk had my Outlook calendar open. It was full of placeholders arranged in different colors. The other screen showed a website with flight tickets to Mexico. I looked from one to the other and remembered what Sofia and I had discussed at the bar on Friday night. She had invited me to go to Mexico with her. I still had vacation days left over from last year and could negotiate to get away for two weeks.

The pop-up on the other screen blinked like laser lights when the reminder of my next placeholder appeared. Go to the People First department: sign the contract. I had put two straight-mouthed emojis next to it. The emojis and the reminder disappeared when I clicked snooze and focused on the flight tickets. I changed the flight dates to different combinations. One month. Or two. But no. I could not. That was so dangerous. Alone. As a woman. Not speaking the language. It would be so irresponsible. The danger of a new country. Of newness. Alone. I couldn't do that to my parents. I was the only daughter they still had.

The reminder reappeared, and I couldn't snooze more.

My feet slogged over the carpet as I walked to the People First department. I passed the expansion team. They sat together in the agile workplace and looked at a world map with percentages on different continents. More, more, more. I wanted to shout: GREED. I went to the room in my head and unapologetically made a noise until almond blossoms appeared. I closed my eyes and continued walking until I bumped into the glass door of the office I needed to be in.

“Nora, there you are,” the People First colleague said. “Time to sign.” She handed me the pen and guided me to the chair before her desk. I poked the pen into my thigh when she read the essential parts of the contract out loud. I

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witnessed my hand reaching for the paper on the table. It went in slow motion until it stopped.

*Don't.*

The signatures waited impatiently for mine. The line on the last page fell apart. The dots came from the paper, like knife points that stopped barely a centimeter before they stung me.

“You have to sign here,” she instructed. She tried to hide her impatience and looked on edge again, like the expression had stayed the same over the weekend. “Here.”

*You don't have to do anything.*

*Who are you?*

*You wanted a meeting. Here I am.*

I had to be grateful for a job at a company that kept a strong team during the pandemic. I wouldn't complain. People relied on me; I had to make the marketing materials for the expansion markets. I could grow in the company. I should be grateful. Grateful for safety.

*Stability is not going to get you further.*

*Not now!*

*Am I on mute?*

I would be able to afford an apartment in this housing crisis. I was done with changing roommates every six months. I was almost thirty, and I needed a room of my own. Privacy. I was an adult. Or I should be. I could put my painting gear in the storage room. I could not wait to buy new painting gear. My ex threw it all away. I recalled the summary of our discussions: Are you done playing around? We need two permanent contracts to get a mortgage. It's time to grow up; you and your hobbies. He had never shown a fraction of the joy for my art as he had for stability. I should not change my mind again. I should not run away from adult life.

“Nora?”

*You don't want permanence. There's more out there. Can you hear me?  
I hear you. Can you say it one more time?*

*There's more out there. There is more out there. There is—*

“I really have to go. Now,” I whispered to the contract. I looked up and said the words to my colleague. Then I put my hands in front of my mouth. I could not unthink it after I'd said it. “I am going.” I pushed the office chair away and got up, ready to book the flight and call Sofia. My colleague realized what I was doing and started talking about ongoing projects and responsibilities.

“I'm going,” I said again.

She looked at me like I was crazy. “You have to give a month's notice. You cannot just leave.”

*She has a point.*

*Oh.*

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At work, I felt like an irresponsible child for changing my mind again. Sofia and I ran into each other often and discussed the plans for Mexico. I would leave Amsterdam three days earlier on a cheaper flight ticket and join her for six weeks. We would go to the beach towns. Six weeks felt terribly long, and I got nervous thinking about it. But I would return one day before I could move into the small studio. That made sense.

On my walk home every afternoon, I listened to a voice that changed direction within a chorus and lyrics that told me it was OK to change my mind with every new day. I listened to it daily until I closed my work laptop for the last time. I threw the suffocating clothes away, stored three boxes of clothes I

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had left in a storage room and left the secondhand furniture for the person who would take over my room. I bought a backpack, packed it, and handed in the keys to the student flat and left for the airport.

I called my mom again. It was to reassure her, to tell her I'd be careful. She did not pick up.

## Green White Red

**Dimensions:** 6,000,000cm x 5,000,000cm

It has been Tuesday, February 14, for the last thirty-five hours when I arrive in another time zone. The wall of the hostel had the word “welcome” written in different fonts. There were more words on the wall. I searched for the letter combination; “help-where am I.”

“We can check in tomorrow; it’s late. You’re in the mixed dorm. I will show you the way,” said *Guy from Reception*. He took my day pack, which held all the essential objects I would travel with.

I observed the hallways to my room until I bumped into his back.

“Sorry,” I said, inspecting the pictures of different parts of Mexico. Pyramids with hot air balloons flying over them, mariachi bands, deserts, small villages. I had arrived in the dark and was fixated on my Google Maps in the Uber from the airport. These pictures were my first impression. So far so good, though I preferred them painted.

He showed me my bed and headed to the door.

“Wait,” I said. “Excuse me,” I corrected myself with politeness. “Can you tell me where the lockers are?”

I followed the direction that his hand pointed to. It went all the way through the three meters of the hostel room. There were four backpacks and six bunk beds. Clothes covered two of them. Two beds had the curtains closed,

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and one reading light was on. Someone's feet were coming from under it. *Guy from Reception* left, and I almost tripped over one backpack as I walked to my locker.

Passport, check. Name: Nora Van Wilpe. Born: Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tourist visa? Inside. The woman at the immigration wrote two numbers on the easy-to-lose piece of paper. It was hard to decode the number of days she gave me, but it looked like a nine and a zero. That was an unnecessarily long time. I put my belongings away and stored the key in the special compartment of my fanny pack.

The curtain of the bed across the room opened. I didn't know what surprised me more: how gracefully she came down or how she looked like she was expecting me. She landed on the floor as if hanging from trapezes and came down like a feather perched on a table after everyone had hurriedly left the room. But this room was not deserted. It was her, me, *Guy with Closed Curtains*, and the absence of three others.

"New in town?" She moved a lock of hair behind her ear. Her hands were decorated with rings on each finger. She had tawny brown highlights in her caramel-colored hair, as on old magazine covers. It was not clear if the highlights were from the sun.

"Just now. It was a long flight." *But I managed*, I wanted to add. What exactly? I got on a plane, scrolled through movies on the screen, started one, and changed to another. None of the films on the plane kept my attention, and I was too nervous to concentrate. I preferred looking out the window for twelve hours. How did that feel like an achievement? Or taking a taxi from the airport to a hostel, where someone expected me and where I had booked three weeks ago. An hour ago, when I sat in the taxi from the airport, it felt like I had moved mountains by flying across the ocean.

“Are you joining the tour?” She changed her clothes in the middle of the room. The only colors she wore were the rings on her fingers and two on her toes. The thought cloud over my head filled itself with white-beach islands, palm trees to dance under, and vintage markets in a hippie village. You could only get there if you walked an abandoned road for hours. Her best friend must have bought one, saying: “It made me think of you.”

“Will you?” she asked again. The cloud burst.

“It’s dark outside.” It was the number one rule of staying safe, I had read.

“The hostel is organizing a street food tour. We are leaving in thirty minutes.” *You should join*; her smile added to the explanation of Tuesday evening’s schedule.

### **Woman with Rings**

We stood at the corner in front of someone making street food in a big hot pan with cheerful umbrellas around it. He sold corn mixed with hot water, chili flakes, and a big blob of mayonnaise. I had not wanted to order it but *Guy from Reception* got one for everyone.

“It’s included in the tour,” he said as he distributed my first Mexican snack.

“It must taste better than it looks,” I said. The heat came through the plastic cup, and I hesitantly took a bite.

“Oh my ... It’s way better,” I replied to myself.

Someone pulled my denim jacket to tell me I had to stay close to the group. We continued, and *Woman with Rings* came walking next to me. I swallowed my last bite.

“How many countries have you been to?” I asked carefully.

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She answered that she did not remember. Places from all over the world flew out of her mouth. Cascades in Mexico, volcanoes in Central America, and the bungee jump in South America. Glaciers further down to the south.

We arrived at the next stop and got tacos, quesadillas, or something with the same ingredients but another name. “How do you do that all by yourself?”

She shrugged her shoulders and took a bite of her taco. I remembered I had mine in front of me, sprinkled with lemon chili. I took a bite and felt tears pressing at the back of my eyes.

“How long will you stay in Mexico City?” she asked. We had to take a step away from the street seller. Another group of people passed us. It was unclear what the line was and who belonged to our group. We continued walking the streets of Mexico City. So far, I had not seen the chaos I expected.

“Three days.”

She looked at me, wanting to continue.

“I’m planning to travel for six weeks and arrived three hours ago, as you know.”

“Are you traveling alone?”

“Me, alone?” I laughed before she said “alone,” but we had to stop our conversation. We entered a jazz bar that welcomed us with an empty room. Frames without pictures covered the walls. There was no music, but someone waved us up the stairs. One hallway, two other empty-looking bars, and a stair brought us to the rooftop. The jazz band was playing under the light balloons in different colors. Part of the group got here earlier and had ordered margaritas.

“This is the number one rule in Mexico: margaritas on your first night,” someone said.

Our group had shrunk from twenty people to eight. I had not noticed that more than half of them had returned to the hostel after the food part of the

evening. But *Woman with Rings* was here. I wanted to keep on listening to her. I sat at the last chair on the table, and someone else sat down next to me. We used cheers to say hello.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

The city where I could ride my bike through the narrow streets. Where the canals were magnificent in all seasons. Full of museums and full of gigs in the concert hall I’d visited alone since I was sixteen. The city where I saw my youth and future and where every street held a memory. The city where I could gaze through open windows that showed scenarios I distorted into paintings.

“Amsterdam,” was the only thing I said.

The waiter brought new drinks. Two musicians performed a jazz concert: The woman wore extravagant clothing, and the other band members performed in black. They turned up their volume. The couples danced slowly until they changed their jazz repertoire to salsa, I assumed.

I was surrounded by six different nationalities. The table conversations went from travel plans to travel memories. The people at this table were here for three months, six weeks, just starting, like me, or continuing. One person was happy to go home, saying he missed the comfort of his routine. The couple at the end of the table had gotten rid of all their belongings, including their apartment. They were on the first day of their two-year trip around the world.

I listened and pretended to be busy getting the fruit out of my glass with a straw. My margarita activity didn’t stop them from asking questions back. The fruit wouldn’t come from the glass. I gave up and participated in the conversations.

“I’m traveling for six weeks, together with a colleague,” I explained.

“Did your colleague join the street tour?” the guy beside me asked.

I wish. Sofia was still in Amsterdam. It was cheaper for me to get a flight earlier. Just three days before I would see her.

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