



CHRISTINA BERTA THE JOURNEY

The
Journey

The Journey



by
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Dedication



To Jessica and Selina, who were born in this multinational city

And Frank, for getting us there in the first place

Chapter One



“Would you like some chips with that?” asked Ali from behind the counter. It was noon and he was busy preparing a lamb kofte wrap for his first customer of the day. “Just a small portion, please,” replied the gentleman, before making his way to one of the restaurant’s few tables.

It was just before the lunch-time rush. Soon the place would be crammed full with school children on their lunch breaks, queuing for chips, as well as labourers and businessmen looking for a quick bite to satisfy their hunger.

Le Durumier was located on a busy junction at the crossroads of Europe, nestled between the Brussels headquarters of the European institutions and the greater ring. Its clientele reflected the culturally diverse nature of the area, in which Belgians coexisted peacefully alongside Turkish and Moroccan immigrants and EU nationals.

Ali was a Turkish immigrant, who had moved to Brussels ten years earlier. He was a hard worker, having built up his snack bar from nothing. Although not entirely dissatisfied with his lot in life, he longed for something more. This desire, which he could not quite put his finger on, often led to a tendency to daydream. Whenever there was a lull in trade, he was frequently to be found sitting on his motorbike

outside the fast food restaurant, deep in thought.

The sole customer seated in the far corner of the restaurant was not a regular. Ali guessed from his grey suit and badge that he was either a businessman or a bureaucrat.

“Here you go, sir,” said Ali, placing the freshly made food on the table. “Thank you,” replied the customer, who was busy reading the latest issue of *Europolitics*. As he prepared to make his way back to the counter, Ali’s eye fell on an article entitled ‘Ankara sees crisis looming’.

Victor was the permanent representative of a Non Governmental Organisation actively lobbying in favour of Turkey’s bid to join the EU. The country’s membership process had been fraught with problems from the start and opinion in Europe was divided, with many countries opposing Turkey’s application. Victor had his work cut out for him.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?” ventured Victor, noticing Ali’s interest in the article. “Go ahead,” he replied. “I’m preparing a study on Turkish integration in Europe. In order to gain a better understanding of the immigrant population, I’m looking for somebody to represent the Turkish community in Brussels, to act as the voice of the people.” He paused to take a sip of his mineral water. “Would you be interested?”

Ali took a moment to reflect on this proposal. The voice of the people...what exactly did this mean? He wandered outside, looked up at the sky—half hoping to conjure up some inspiration from above—and turned in the direction of his motorbike.

As Victor finished his meal, he placed the money on the table and made his way outside. “Let me know when you’ve made up your mind,” he said, taking a business card

out of his inside pocket and handing it to Ali.

Seated on his bike, deep in thought, Ali glanced upwards. Just as he did so, he witnessed the sun beginning to break through the clouds.

Chapter Two



As he inserted his specially-adapted stick into the bottle bank, Pierre had a feeling that it was going to be a good day. It was 8 A.M. on Sunday morning and all was quiet. This was his favourite time of day—nobody to look and stare at what he was doing, or comment on the shamefulness of it all.

He did not need to dig too deep as the bottle bank was rather full. The weekend was always a busy time, with many people stopping off to dispose of their empty bottles as they set about their weekly chores.

Pierre carefully angled his stick and slowly lifted the empty wine bottle out of the container. Thankfully, it was still intact. Its proprietor had had the decency not to hurl it into the bottle bank, which would have smashed it into a million pieces and rendered it worthless.

Pierre stepped aside for a moment and pretended to fiddle with the zip of his shopping trolley as a man walked past with his dog. Although he was not disturbing anybody, he felt embarrassed by what he was doing and had a tendency to distance himself from the bottle bank whenever passers-by approached.

Fifteen minutes later, Pierre had removed six wine bottles and four beer bottles. He began to do some mental

arithmetic: six times twenty cents plus four times ten cents equals one euro and sixty cents. It was not even eight-thirty in the morning and already he had done well.

Belgium was big on sorting and recycling household waste. A number of bottle banks were strategically located across the capital and inhabitants were used to disposing of their empty glass bottles in this way.

Some bottles, such as those for beer and wine, carried a small deposit. In order to redeem this, however, it was necessary to return the empty bottles to the store from which they were purchased, something that not everybody had the time or desire to do—especially when it was just a matter of ten or twenty cents per bottle.

Nevertheless, there were a number of financially hard-up citizens in Brussels for whom a few cents made a great difference. Pierre was one of them.

He carefully placed the bottles in his shopping trolley and headed off to his next stop. It was 300 metres away and he hoped that he would get there before the competition arrived.

Pierre knew most of the others who, like him, earned a living in this way. Some were pensioners trying to supplement their low incomes, others were alcoholics looking for extra money to satisfy their addictions and still others were homeless, with no alternative means of supporting themselves. Pierre fell into the first category.

As he approached the next bottle bank, he saw that the ‘trio’—the group of three women who always worked together—had beaten him to it. Their paths often crossed, but there was no animosity between them. Like all ‘bottle-bankers’, they understood that whoever got there first was entitled to keep the bottles that they managed to retrieve.

In any case, there were many other locations he could go to and it would not be long before the Sunday rush would begin, with people dropping off their unwanted bottles by the carload in some instances.

Making his way to the next bottle bank, some four hundred metres further, Pierre spotted a man lying on a bench, huddled under some blankets. “At least I have a roof over my head and enough money to live on,” he mused. “Things aren’t really so bad after all.”

Chapter Three



While rushing to get dressed after his long, warm shower, Paul reflected on the day ahead. It was Friday, which marked the start of the weekend, and he was planning to party. He had not been living in Brussels for long. The city was still a novelty to him and he was determined to make the most of it.

Paul had been lucky enough to land a traineeship at the European Commission. Competition was tough, but his degree in Natural Hazard Management and French had made him a prime candidate for the services of the Directorate-General of the Environment.

DG ENV, as it is more commonly known, was located in Auderghem, one of the 19 municipalities of Brussels. One of the advantages of this location was that it was not far from the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB), in the municipality of Ixelles, which had an abundance of student accommodation at affordable prices. Paul had managed to find decent accommodation in this part of town and enjoyed the liveliness of the student quarter.

Having finished his breakfast, he picked up his rucksack and headed out of the front door towards his bike. The journey time was quick, and within ten minutes he had reached the office.

The proximity of his workplace, coupled with the eco-friendliness of the city, meant that cycling to work was a viable option. Not only did it save him money; it also helped him to stay fit.

Thanks to a number of initiatives, cycling in Brussels had become increasingly popular over recent years. Cycle lanes and bike rental schemes could now be found across the capital and every day a growing number of people decided to ditch their cars in favour of their bikes.

Paul had a busy day ahead of him but, like most of his fellow trainees, he liked to play hard and work hard. One of the benefits of working for the European Commission was that it had its own 'Stage Committee', named after the French word for trainees (*stagiaires*), responsible for organising events such as parties. It was these events that he most looked forward to after a hard day's work.

Tonight he would be going to Kitty O'Shea's, an Irish pub at the heart of the European district. He had not been there before, but had heard rumours that many an important decision relating to EU policy had been made over a pint as the place was habitually frequented by senior commissioners.

He planned to beat the Friday afternoon traffic by cycling to the venue. In Belgium, it was traditional practice for a number of firms to allow their staff to leave early on Friday afternoons and consequently the roads tended to be extremely busy from mid-afternoon onwards. Cycling would be by far the quickest option.

After parking his bicycle near the pub, he ventured in. He must have been early because he could not yet see any of the other trainees. Making his way to the bar, he ordered a pint of Guinness and waited for the others to arrive.

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