

ESSAY

# Ignorance and Bliss

by Emily Kossak



"Just Keep Walking" by Vanesa Erjavec

The day I should have called the ambulance was bright and sunny. It was a day that should have smelled like summer: green park lawns, sweat, sizzling tar, overripe cherries, pungent petrol. But my apartment in a rather rough corner of Hamburg smelled of damp clothes and risotto, like the saucers with vinegar and dish soap I had placed all around our flat against the fruit flies. The vinegar attracts them, and when they sit down on the saucer, the dish soap sticks to their wings and they drown. Every night I washed a considerable amount of dead fruit flies down the sink. Watching them disappear down the drain filled me with satisfaction.

My flat mates and I avoided each other as much as we could. Sometimes I heard Sarah and her boyfriend showering together. Sofia filled the fridge with pastries from the café she worked at, but never ate them. Our conversations were clumsy and awkward, because we had nothing in common except the key to our apartment. Sometimes I sat on my windowsill and watched my neighbor smoke on the balcony across the street. Occasionally his girlfriend came out to clasp his chest from behind and stroke his hair. He did not move, but just continued peering into the void.

The actual reason I lived there was the harbor five minutes from our apartment. In the summer I walked across the street to the port about every day. On the way I passed a Polish restaurant with a giant picture of a whole roasted chicken in its window. I walked by neon signs screaming *SEX!SEX!SEX!* into my face, tired Arabs in kebab stores, shiny, flickering police cars, a group of homeless people holding up their plastic cups, a “Jesus lives!” banner and then a bakery, the one place in which the world seemed perfectly intact.

Cigarette butts and Burger King trash and plastic cups that had been filled with cheap mojitos the night before covered the ground. Latin American sex workers danced in windows that never closed, gray curtains were drawn in apartments with high ceilings and stucco on the walls. Every Friday afternoon excited tourists arrived to peek at the turmoil brought to stage on the streets. They played their role along with it until they staggered back to their hotel rooms in the early morning.

This place was a shithole, a moloch, a melting pot for failed existences. It belonged to the poor, the rich, the wannabes, the criminal, the common. I belonged here too. I loved it.

Like a helpless beetle that fell on its back, I spent the summer trying to get back on my feet. Apart from extinguishing the world’s fruit flies, my summer goal was to survive on things that consisted mainly of water: cucumbers, watermelons, and sticky mixed beer. I came home long after sunrise, I laid in bed watching documentaries about Peruvian rainforests, I

dragged myself to work and did the dishes two days too late, I collected a considerable number of Indian spices in old olive jars, I cooked coffee and started reading a new book every week that I never finished. I wasn't happy but I didn't know that, so it didn't matter.

As soon as it was warm enough outside, I stopped wearing shoes when I went to the supermarket around the corner. The warm slabs on the soles of my feet felt good, and the stares of people watching me navigate around the glass splinters felt even better. Our house entrance was often occupied by drug addicts hiding from the rain or the sun, but I soon got used to them. They too needed a place, after all, and they never bothered me. They usually gathered in small groups to share crack pipes or a needle, and scurried away around the corner as soon as I opened the door.

The crack smokers were different from the drunk homeless: some of the homeless just needed a shower, a haircut and a few days without booze to seem like sane people again. They chatted, they ate, they walked around in the streets. But the addicts sitting on the steps outside my door seemed no longer truly alive. They gathered in dark corners hidden from the sunlight, made no sounds and were barely able to walk. Their eyes were empty, their limbs skinny and sore. Sometimes I woke up in the middle of the night and heard them scream in anger, pain or despair. In the daytime they disappeared into empty basements or staircases when someone approached.

That day I went to the supermarket to buy dinner. In the stairwell that led down to the front door the wallpaper was flaking off the walls. I pushed open the heavy, barred door to the outside and blinked in the bright sunlight. On my way to the supermarket, I passed two gay bars, a pizza place, and a shop specialized on dance shoes. The sun warmed my naked feet, my head was empty, my mind a blank canvas.

Then I saw something, *someone*, crouched on the ground with flickering eyes, straggly hair, and jeans full of holes. I realized immediately that it was one of the addicts, a sad character from another world, minding her business while I minded mine. So I kept my eyes on the ground as I walked past her, but this time something was different: the girl was looking at me.

I looked back and saw a huge hole on her forehead. Blood ran over her face and clung to her hair. Her mouth was half open, as if she was trying to say something. Then I saw that she wasn't really looking at me, but that she rather looked through me. She said nothing, she saw nothing. Her eyes rolled back and with a quiet sigh, she sank to the ground. Her body barely made a sound as it hit the pavement.

I was just as blind as her. I kept walking as if nothing had happened.

In the shop windows I watched my reflection, a transparent, dark copy of my body. I could see through it just as the girl had done a few seconds before. I could pretend that I hadn't seen anything, that I could not help her, that I had no responsibility. People drink, they smoke crack and shout at night, and sometimes, people fall unconscious on the street with a hole in their head. What did it matter?

The supermarket was bright and cold. I shifted through the aisles, picked up skimmed milk, a tin of mushrooms, crackers, and two kilos of apples. Outside, a homeless man fought with the staff of the supermarket. A dog licked up some liquid that leaked onto the pavement. The sun loomed over the roof tiles, the sky was bright and baby blue.

The girl was gone when I turned around the corner on my way back to my apartment. Maybe someone else had called an ambulance, or maybe a basement had swallowed her. I had missed a chance to do something, but I was busy enough carrying home all my purchases, wasn't I? I suddenly sweated heavily and scolded myself for not bringing a bag. One of the apples tumbled out of my arms and fell on the pavement with a thud. I watched it roll down the gutter, then realized I was at the door to my house. I turned the key in the lock, and the door snapped open. I sighed in relief when it slammed shut with a bang.