

My obsession with endstations

Susan Leahy

Two hundred and three of us sat in suits around the table. It was Thursday again. I watched Áron. He caressed his moustache as if he were Dalí. We both doodled. I told him about the Italian general who drove me home in his Jaguar.

“Is he the bald one?” Áron asked.

“Yes,” I said. Áron said the man was married. I shrugged. The general’s suits were impeccable. The chairman spoke on and on. We didn’t listen. Our ambassadors pretended to.

Áron was from Hungary. We sat behind our ambassadors every week in a great hall that had a thousand windows, in the Hofburg in Vienna, for meetings of an international organisation so full of self-importance that nobody realised it was known only to itself.

The Irish and Hungarian ambassadors were modest, and knew that we came from countries too small to have opinions that mattered, so neither Áron nor I paid much attention to what was said, other than to note that the Americans made a statement, which caused the Russians to object, after which the EU spoke - through Belgium, who held the presidency - and that the French clarified a point, which meant the British had to too, and finally the Azerbaijani ambassador intervened, which meant that the Armenian ambassador would finish the meeting with something disagreeable.

Afterwards, Áron bought me coffee. In the café in the Hofburg, they made it very strong. It was so black it left shadows on our teeth. Áron had to get the U-Bahn back to his embassy, but I could walk. I usually went back past the Minoritenkirche. It was a little out of my way, but in the embassy it was understood that the ten-minute walk usually took half an hour.

When I got to the office, I wrote a concise report that would not have any effect on foreign policy, but that I emailed anyway to twenty embassies as well as to the Department in Dublin. I filed my nails, which had grown so long that I kept laddering my own tights, then switched off the computer before anyone could reply. I drank more coffee with the military attaché. We discussed which uniform he should wear to the opera that evening, then watered the orchids. I denied visas to two Bosnians who wanted to work as builders in Donegal, and smoked two cigarettes very quickly out the window

into the impending evening.

We finished early, and I went to IKEA to buy a bed. Mine was broken. A leg had disintegrated in the middle of the night. Frau Minsch, who was my landlady, inspected it and the floor around it, but there was no clear reason for the collapse.

I said, "It must be termites," but we couldn't see that fine sawdust they deposit after themselves. Frau Minsch blamed me. We had a long argument.

She said, many times, "It is because you are foreign that you did not look after the bed."

IKEA was quite far out. I got the special shuttle bus. Everybody on the bus was alone. I was the youngest. The old woman beside me was also going to buy a bed. She had the catalogue and she said in German, "I will tell you about all the best beds," but I didn't understand anything else that she said, and she grew impatient when all I answered was "Ja," and "Natürlich."

I wanted to explain to her that learning German had diminished me, shrunk my spoken world to greetings, farewells and very little in between, that the obliteration of my linguistic ability crept through my body when I slept, and in my dreams nobody spoke; but it was too difficult to imagine saying that, and besides, we were on the IKEA bus.

I wandered through the store, and lay in my ill-fitting suit on beds at different heights with different mattresses, none of which had

sheets on. I took off my heels before I got onto every bed, but some of the men who worked there looked at my feet and my toes through the stockings I was wearing. I decided on a very hard mattress and the plainest bedframe I could find. It did not even have a headboard, and this made it cheaper.

I took a half day from work so the bed could be delivered. When it came, I made it alone. It was like adult Lego, and took me about one and three quarters of an hour. I was very proud of this, and I have a photo of myself lying on it, in my suit.

Removal men took away the old bed, but also my pillows, which I had brought from Spain. Frau Minsch and I argued again. She had seen the men taking the pillows. She gave me new ones as a peace offering, but they were square and not like the long, narrow, flat pillows I preferred. I found that they required a new way of lying down. The first time the pillows were in my bed, I thought through the night. They made me feel a connection with the people whose diurnal existence I hadn't considered. How did they sleep, lying like that? I became aware that their colourless Austrian dreams were mirrors of my own.

I did not sleep much at night through the autumn and winter. This was not insomnia: I store sleep like some people store fat, and on many afternoons, I slept in my office with the door closed.

Time in Vienna passed slowly, and in the evenings I could stand the apartment no longer and left it to go alone into the city. On those

nights - it was still early in my year there - I went into the first district with only my keys, a few hundred schillings and my weekly travel ticket. The U-bahn connected with other lines in the centre, and I transferred from my own to another one and traveled far out to the end of the line.

At the end station, I switched lines, direction, or form of transport. Nothing guided me but the rule that I had to go from end station to end station. Very rarely, I stopped after just one trajectory. Mostly I did this all night. Sometimes I passed through rougher areas of the city. Once I was mugged, but the only thing of value on me was my weekly ticket. When it was fully dark outside, I watched buildings through the reflection of my face on the window. They split my forehead open, one by one, or the rain washed them away, or I stared at them through the condensation on the window and past the snow outside.

I hid this habit from everybody. I didn't want to explain or defend myself; how would I? The journeys across the city freed me from the monotonous utterances of my days, but it would be foolish to say, "Yes, that made me happy!" I allowed very little to make me happy, but dissatisfaction stilled within me, lulled by the motion and the wheels on the tracks.

The journeys fulfilled in me a desire for obscurity and anonymity that was groundless; I was nobody. In many photos from then, the girl who was me, that year, looks down, or away from the camera.

She thought herself unforgivably unknowable. "Vienna - you fool!" I would like to shake her and whisper, "You are young, and you are living in Vienna!" but I didn't listen to people who told me that then.

I grew accustomed to attending meetings with agendas we rarely got through, and aims that were never achieved, or were achieved only months later, when we would require more meetings to remind ourselves of why we had decided to take a certain course of action.

I was twenty-five before I understood the absurdity of my existence. I accepted this in the halls of the Hofburg, which were full of graying diplomats who were on a reward posting to an organisation that had once done some good work in the 1990s, and before that in the Cold War.

In April of the year I was there, the Organisation passed an agreement to intervene in a conflict in a small new country in Eastern Europe whose inhabitants had been killing each other since the first Thursday meeting of December. This was considered progress, but by that time I had tendered my resignation.

I went out, of course, with colleagues and people who became my friends, but going to the bars and cafés in Vienna offered nothing to hold back this sense of the ridiculous, just men who asked, "What are you doing in the city?" and "for how long?" and "why?"

My journeys ended when the line I was on closed for the night; they had no purpose or destination, only this temporal termination, which could have been anywhere in Vienna. Sometimes I got a taxi

home, but usually I walked. There were times I walked for more than two hours until I recognised a street name. Often I walked along or beside the tracks of the tram, and once, late in the year - when I knew the city very well - I tried to follow the U-bahn line above ground directly back into the city, but once the line went underground, it was too difficult to follow, and I gave up.

The completion of each journey astounded me. In my imagination, great arcs of distance rose over the map I had at home and enveloped the houses, apartment blocks, museums and parks that I passed. Now, when I think about them, they bubble into three-dimensional memories of places I never came to know.

In Vienna, there are old trams and new trams. The latter are warmer, but they are like trams anywhere. I liked the old trams best, and in particular, Tram Number One and Tram Number Two, which circled the city along the Ring Road in either direction, ceaselessly marking the boundary between the old city and its more modern urban overflow, like mechanised incarnations of Frau Minsch who resented foreigners diluting her city.

The first time that I sat - cold and slightly uncomfortable - on a wooden seat on Tram Number One and didn't get off at my stop, I was on my way home. I watched the sky swirl a little through the mist, and listened to the clinking bell, and read signs again and again: Schwarzenberg Platz, Stubentor, Opernring - the names drained thoughts from my head while car headlights scraped along the ceil-

ing of the tram. When I finally got off, the curving, old-fashioned streetlamps marched me home.

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