

Dancing at the source

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On the road

“How do I say goodbye? What do I tell my parents and loved ones if I don't know whether or when I'll see them again? What can I say to reassure them when I myself don't know what awaits me?

The big difference is that for them ordinary life goes on without me as a physical presence, making the sense of loss feel profound. For me an adventure is beginning, in which everything will be different, new and exciting... I'm leaving, but with mixed feelings, because what am I leaving behind and what will I experience?”

Today is Dad's birthday and three days ago it was Mom's turn. I'm usually there for one of the two days, at least since I moved out. We then celebrate both birthdays at once. I haven't lived nearby for a long time, so dropping by spontaneously or often isn't an option. This time I'm at both birthdays, because in a sense I'm temporarily living with my parents. Until today, that is, because today I'm going on a trip.

Over the past six months I sublet my house that was for sale under the Dutch Vacancy Act, went on a dance holiday to Cuba, and then sailed on a tall ship around Western Europe. I'm just back from that. The ship is now in port, where it will stay for the winter, and I've decided not to sail anymore, so *that ship has sailed*. In the meantime my house was sold for a small profit and I moved in with my parents for a while to figure out what my next step should be.

What would you do if it were November and a cold, wet, dark winter was looming? If you had just returned from the Mediterranean and could still feel the warm sun on your skin? If your house had been sold at a profit and, at that moment, you had no job, partner, or family and were therefore free to go wherever you wanted...?

I decided that chilly December to book a one-way ticket to the Caribbean and let myself be surprised by whatever would come my way there. Of course I could have just applied for a job, looked for a little house and... But how often does someone get this chance? Right. Exactly. That's why.

On my father's birthday my parents take me to the train station. There we stand, the three of us, on an empty platform. A cold wind blows around us and we don't really know what else to say. My mother takes pictures of my travel outfit, of us together and of the moment I step onto the train. The time has come. I'm leaving. How I'll miss them. And how glad I am for the internet, which makes them feel very close - we can call whenever we want. I wave until I can no longer see them, then sit down with a sigh and dab my tears with my pareo. Such a handy, versatile scarf. Looking out, I wonder if I've forgotten anything. The most important thing, my dance shoes, are in my bag. The little booklet "What & How in Spanish" is there too. I drift off and think about what awaits me in the coming days. I can't look any further ahead yet, because I don't know what I'll be doing then...

It's grim outside and I enjoy the thought that it will soon be behind me and that, for an indefinite time, I will be able to bask in the tropical sun. After changing trains twice, I arrive in Antwerp late in the afternoon and set off on foot to look for Paul's house; I know him from my previous job. He was a supplier and we always had a good understanding. When he heard about my travel plans, he invited me to stay with him and his family. That fits well with my plans, since my flight departs very early from Brussels and that's easier to reach from Antwerp than from the north of Holland.

As soon as I step inside I fit into the family as if it had always been that way. What lovely people. I sit down to a messy dinner, which with two small children can't be expected to be any different, and enjoy the coziness. After dinner the three of us sit and chat for a while, and when I go to bed in my luxurious guest room I'm even given a small cherry-stone heat pack to ward off the cold. What a treat.

Despite the nerves I sleep well, and in the morning I'm already up early with Paul in the kitchen. Eating doesn't go so well; my stomach is fairly tied up with nerves. At eight o'clock I'm at Brussels Airport and everything goes smoothly. On the plane I'm in the last row in the middle section, together with two gentlemen from what used to be Persia. They're in their fifties, friends, divorced, and often go on holiday together. We have a really pleasant time together, which makes the time fly. Literally, because we arrive earlier than expected at Punta Cana Airport in the Dominican Republic.

Shortly before arrival a flight attendant gives me a little form that I have to fill in and later hand over to customs at the airport. I try to fill in all the fields as best I can and linger for a moment on the box labeled *Occupation*. Well, what should I put there? The job I most recently had, or the one I had the longest, or... the job I would most like to do? I write the latter: management assistant. With a broad smile I fold up the form and tuck it into my passport. My choice is made; this trip will be about what I most want to do. Oh, this is going to be fun.

Sosua, Dominican Republic

"I look down at my feet in bewilderment. They're not doing what I want. Why not? Is what I'm asking of them so strange? Am I so heavily programmed? I'm pulled out of my worrying by a question in Spanish. "Shall we try one more time?" I understand. I nod, so the music starts up again and I make yet another attempt. It'll probably work eventually, won't it?"

The Punta Cana airport is the most extraordinary airport I have ever seen. Not that I've seen that many, but this one makes an impression; the roof is entirely made of palm leaves (palm = cana), bright daylight and warm outside air flow in through large openings in the side walls, and everything is on one level and very easy to find your way around. What a wonderful arrival. The flight went faster than expected, so I have to wait a few hours at the airport. Primi - met through the Couchsurfing website - is coming to pick me up and I will stay for a week. We had brief contact via WhatsApp just before my departure, and now it's a matter of waiting to see how reliable that contact will prove to be. I find it quite exciting and repeat to myself like a mantra that there are more good people than bad, which makes it unlikely that I'll meet someone with bad intentions. My new friends from the plane gave me their phone numbers in case Primi didn't show up and I would "at least have friends I could fall back on." Such a sweet offer, but I hope I won't have to use it.

After a few hours waiting in the shade and enjoying the lovely temperature, Primi finally arrives, offering countless apologies for keeping me waiting so long. The ice is quickly broken. We drive to Primi's house. He lives in a sort of reserve. It's an enclosed area with many homes, each with its own little fenced-off plot. There's only one way out, and there's a boom gate with a small hut beside it where a very thin guard sits with a large gun slung over his shoulder-to scare

off unwanted visitors... Apparently this is necessary in this area. Outside the wall poverty reigns; inside the wall live the 'rich'. So I'm staying with the rich. For free. Twisted world.

The tension, the long flight and the heat make it so that when I settle into my room all I want to do is shower and crawl into bed, but it's only four in the afternoon... I have to hang on a little longer.

Primi loves to cook, which I don't mind at all. He speaks good English because of his work in the tourist industry, and that makes my stay with him very easy. I have my own bedroom. We share the bathroom, living room and kitchen. That's going particularly well. During the day he's at work, and each day I'm given the choice of spending the whole day at the beach (which he won't let me leave because of the poverty and crime in the neighborhoods next to the beach) or spending a whole day in the reserve. I decide to mix it up a bit.

After my first night, feeling refreshed, I set off with Primi. He'd taken a day off for it. We spend a few hours on a completely deserted white palm-fringed beach with an azure sea and deep blue sky. Incredible. If that's a sign of what's to come for the rest of my trip, it can only get overwhelmingly amazing. What a wonderful tropical place. Nearby, in a village, we eat at a small local spot; I already feel like a seasoned traveler, but secretly I'm afraid my stomach might not be so enthusiastic about this tasty food. My fear proves unfounded. Apparently I can handle more than I think.

During the days that I stay 'home', I immerse myself in what I could do and where to go during my trip, and I focus mainly on opportunities to dance. I really want to (learn to) dance the dance where it comes from - for example, bachata and merengue originate in the Dominican Republic, salsa in Cuba, tango in Argentina, and I could go on. I want to 'dance at the source' and let that, in broad strokes, be my guiding principle for my travel plans.

Later in the week Primi says we're going out in the evening. Dancing. I'm pleasantly surprised and ready well in advance, but apparently parties here don't start before midnight... We begin our outing at a Shop&Drink in Bávaro. You can compare this shop to a Gall&Gall, a Dutch liquor store in Holland, but in this version very loud reggaeton is playing and everyone stays outside in front of the shop to chat, dance and drink. Apparently a popular way to go out here. Fortunately they sell water too; I like to stay sharp in this unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar people. Because of the loud music you can't have a normal conversation, so I take it all in with my eyes. The bizarrely high heels and short skirts, the leering looks of the men directed at them and all the unspoken words provide plenty of entertainment. I don't need to speak the language for that.

After spending a while at the Shop&Drink, we go to performances by merengue singer Toño Rosario and rapper Black Point. This was not at all what I had expected... Around the stage there are little tables with chairs, all of them occupied. To clarify: at a dance party or a lively show in the Netherlands there is always a dance floor, which is usually full, and only the people who want to catch their breath sit at the tables around the dance floor. That's not how it is here. Everyone is sitting and I can't find a dance floor anywhere. So it looks like dancing between the tables and chairs, I suppose. As soon as the singer makes his entrance onto the stage, about ten (!) people rush to the edge of the stage to photograph and film him with their cell phones. Since I don't want to be the only dancing white person, I wait for others to start dancing, but nothing happens. Everyone dutifully watches the show while they drink liters of alcohol. So I do that too... just watching, then. The merengue singer - a fit fifty-something with blond dreads and revealing leather clothing - is entertaining enough in any case. He is said to be one of the biggest stars in the Dominican Republic. It must be said: the music is great and the man definitely has the X-factor.

Santo Domingo

After Primi drops me off at the bus after a week of 'living together', I feel a sense of relief. It's nice to be able to do my own thing for a while and not have to take my host into account anymore. We didn't really click that well. We had few shared interests, so conversations didn't always flow smoothly... or sometimes not at all, resulting in long silences and each of us being occupied with our own thing.

After plowing through the thick travel guide I brought - the Lonely Planet - I decided to take the bus to the capital, Santo Domingo. The bus's air conditioning is set to freezing; it's so cold. There are people around me wearing hats. A really intense action movie is on with the sound turned way up. What violence in that film. Everyone stares spellbound at the TV screen. I look outside and try to shut out the noise. It's only because this way of traveling is so cheap, but I don't know if I would have done it if I'd known this beforehand. Fortunately it's only for a few hours. Outside the landscape is monotonous, but beautiful. To my left I regularly catch sight of the gorgeous blue sea; beyond that are rolling, dry landscapes with brightly colored huts and vendors selling food along the road. Quite quickly we enter more densely populated areas - the outskirts of the capital. I see a lot of poverty, but also a great deal of color. The whole scene feels very cheerful, and I hope it feels that way to the residents too. Are people with fewer possessions, opportunities, or money necessarily happier? The high crime rates and the large police presence on the streets suggest otherwise, but probably not every resident is part of that. At least, I hope not. I let the surroundings sink in and feel blessed for the opportunities I have in this life.

The bus arrives at the main bus station in Santo Domingo and I start looking for the hostel I've planned to stay at for one night. Primi had tipped me not to get into the first taxi I see, but to walk a bit and only ask for a taxi further down the street. So I walk, pretending to be confident, past the shouting, pushy taxi drivers until I'm roughly grabbed by the arm. Even though it's daytime and I think the chance

of this ending badly is small, I'm pretty startled. I'm dragged toward a taxi while trying to wriggle free. The driver rattles at me in aggressive Spanish and I have no idea what he's saying. Eventually he lets go after I make it clear I don't speak Spanish and need to go there (vaguely pointing to a little place nearby). Brrrrr. Not fun. A few streets away I approach a taxi driver who hardly even notices me and together we head to the hostel - a Lonely Planet recommendation. We can't find it... After asking around a lot we finally find the hostel, but the description in the guidebook is completely wrong. Trust gone... From now on I'll use the internet; at least that's up to date. Mostly.

Although I hadn't booked, luckily they had a room for me. In the room the Wi-Fi turned out to work very well, which I immediately took full advantage of by catching up on WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media. Freshened up and in a good mood, I stepped outside an hour later and found myself right in the center. I walked down the shopping street and enjoyed the luxury. It feels very Western here. The beautiful colonial buildings are well maintained, there are large, well-known shops in the street, it's pleasantly warm and I got myself a delicious Italian ice cream. This is nice. I did attract quite a bit of attention with my blonde hair, but for now I didn't mind. I explored a few side streets and came upon some lovely squares. As soon as it started getting dark I headed back to the hostel. I may have been walking around full of confidence, but at dusk that feeling disappears. Even though it's only six o'clock. The unknown suddenly becomes very, very unknown...

Once at the hostel I want something to eat; reception sends me to the rooftop terrace. I climb up and am surprised by a very cozy, snug, colorful, covered terrace. At the little bar I strike up a conversation with the owner of the hostel, testing my Spanish a bit. The owner and his family are completely absorbed by a baseball game being shown on the big TV. In the meantime they manage to make me a sandwich, quieting my rumbling stomach. I enjoy their enthusiasm for the game and decide to go to a match if the chance arises. Baseball seems much more fun to me than soccer - I always felt that way back in gym class.

I like seeing that baseball is such a big part of daily life here. I go to bed on time and read a little in the cool room. It feels wonderful to have my own little spot where nothing is required and anything goes.

From the hostel I contacted Couchsurfer Amaury and I can go there right away. There is already a Canadian girl, Eve, with whom I have to share the room and the bed, but I don't see that as a problem. It's almost Christmas; the more the merrier, right? The Couchsurf address turns out to be a dealer's house where all kinds of characters come and go, where people smoke weed and watch Netflix all day, where I sleep in a bed often with a few others (fortunately it's a huge bed) and where anything goes. No poverty here. They just do whatever they feel like and nothing seems too crazy to them. Although they do find it strange that the blonde Dutch girl doesn't smoke weed.

Not being used to this type of people, I go out with them a few times out of curiosity. Here too they don't head out until around one in the morning. In a large Hummer with an enormous push bar on the grille we drive through the capital. Everyone else in the car is smoking weed and drinking. I naively ask why everyone here drives big cars with push bars, because it doesn't seem like the kind of place where large livestock roam freely in the streets. It turns out they have those push bars purely for protection while driving and parking. Nobody pays proper attention, so you apparently need them if you want to keep your car in top condition. The fact that we run red lights everywhere makes me see the necessity of those bars. But the reason we run red lights turns out to be purely for safety... Because if we stop at a traffic light, we can be robbed. Ah, right. Lovely thought...

Once I'm in the bar I quickly get tired of it. It's mostly about seeing and being seen and drinking as much as possible. The music is blaring, barely danceable, and it's all about one thing: who goes home with whom? Without any problems I'm taken home earlier, after which they return to the party and continue partying. The next day I wake up

in a crowded bed and move to the couch in the living room to wake up in peace and quiet.

At the next dance party they take me to they mostly play reggaeton. I love that music and I like to shake my butt, but not when a strange man is standing behind me. Fortunately this is easy to avoid by dancing with my back against the wall. After a few hours of (monotonous) reggaeton my enthusiasm has vanished and once again I'm taken home early without any problems; in that respect Amaury is a truly excellent host. But I'd much rather go to dance parties where I can dance with a respectful partner, without having to read anything into it right away...

For a few days, staying at the dealer's house is quite interesting and fun, but it's also hectic, so I'm calling it quits. I'm going to look for another place.

Beckett

I like the neighborhood and by chance I find a Couchsurfer less than 200 meters from the dealer's house. I move in with Beckett. He's a Californian dude and teaches English at a nearby school. The school arranged the housing for him. He lives in a spacious four-room apartment where I'm assigned my own bedroom and bathroom. On top of the building there's even a roof terrace with deck chairs. Beckett always orders takeout, so the kitchen becomes my domain, and he has an extra bike that I can borrow. What freedom - and all of it again for free. To thank him for his hospitality I regularly buy him a beer; it's the least I can do.

It's Christmas and Beckett invites me to go to the beach with him and his friends. That sounds good to me. At home I'd crawl onto the couch in my pajamas under a blanket, with all sorts of treats nearby, and watch Christmas movies, but here it's far too sunny and warm to stay inside, so I go along. We're picked up and on the way we pick someone

else up and stop at a liquor store for some food and, mostly, a lot of booze. The five of us arrive at Boca Chica beach. They set up in the shade in plastic bucket chairs around a plastic table and I find a spot in the sun. The friends drink all day and occasionally order something to eat. I don't feel comfortable, I don't click with the others and I don't like how much they drink. We still have to drive back for more than half an hour... I hadn't considered that drunk driving is very normal here and I absolutely don't want to get used to that idea. I feel relieved when we're home safely around dinnertime. Next Christmas I'll just curl up on the couch with my blanket.

Something's been bothering me, and when I try to write it away I realize that I don't find the Dominican Republic a pleasant country. So far in the Caribbean I've only gotten to know Cuba, and compared to it the DR is a disappointment. I miss the friendly, open atmosphere of Cuba. Here I mainly encounter crime and poverty. I don't feel safe and I'm on my guard, which is such a contrast to how I felt in Havana, Cuba. Nowhere have I felt safer than there, not even in Dutch cities. In Cuba the men are gentlemen; here the men pull the chair out from under you if they want to sit down - so to speak. I find myself desperately wondering whether I did the right thing by waiting about two months before moving on. In any case my plane ticket to Cuba is already booked, so I know where I'm headed. But how am I going to spend my time here in an enjoyable way?

Beckett is going away for a few days with friends, and it feels good to be home alone for a while. The Wi-Fi works great, and I look into what's possible in this city, this country, what else I'd like to do during my trip, and I have pleasant Skype calls with family and friends. I decide I'd like to get out into nature, hoping the vibe there will feel different than in the city. Enthusiastically I start looking for Couchsurfing hosts closer to nature. I also want to do a meditative silent retreat sometime and find a Vipassana near Barcelona that falls on my birthday. Since I always try to be away on my birthday and it appeals to me to spend that day in silence, I keep this option in mind. The possibility of visiting

Haiti also crosses my mind - maybe I could do volunteer work there, for example teaching English to young children. My thoughts jump all over the place and I put it on the back burner for now. First, I'll work on improving my Spanish.

Spanish course

I enroll in a school for Spanish language and dance classes. It has become clear that my Spanish is by no means good enough to make pleasant contact, and they dance here differently than I'm used to, so I definitely want to learn more about that. The school is about a half-hour bike ride from Beckett, and I do intend to go there by bike. I am and will remain a Dutchwoman.

In the days before school starts I walk to the ATM every day, because I can only withdraw a limited amount per day here and that is always just a small part of the school fees. When I've finally withdrawn enough, I spread the money across the pockets of my shorts, tuck a note into my pocket with a copy of my passport and how to reach my parents, take a map of the city, grab my water bottle and get on my bike. Nothing can happen to me this way. I carefully checked the route beforehand and set off in high spirits. The traffic isn't too bad on the road and it does indeed take me about half an hour to get to the school. Relieved that I made it and because I can hand over the money, I have a pleasant chat with the woman from the administration and then get back on my bike. The route home turns out to be a bit trickier because I have to take a different way due to all the one-way streets. It confuses me a little and I feel proud and relieved when I'm home. So nice that I've already done this once. Now I can start school well prepared.

Because the nightlife gets going so late and I feel vulnerable going out on my own, I look for a dance school. If things here are anything like in the Netherlands, dance schools often have evenings where people can dance freely so the students can practice and get to know each other

better. I find a dance school online and write to them. They do indeed have a regular dance night and I decide to go. By myself, to a neighborhood unfamiliar to me. Fortunately I trust the taxi drivers here when it comes to safety - more than the police; they seem corrupt as anything. I'm dropped off at a dark building in a quiet neighborhood. I hesitate as the taxi drives away - shouldn't I have asked him to wait a bit? It's dark already and I feel a little lost. I walk up to the building and look for a door. There's no light anywhere. Am I early? Am I even in the right place? Desperately I pace back and forth, and then someone goes through a door I hadn't noticed before. I follow him, end up in a cozy room and am warmly welcomed and shown around. Mostly students, some from abroad. We hit it off immediately. We chat, drink, dance and I enjoy myself thoroughly. How surprisingly different an evening can turn out to be from what you'd expect. A few hours earlier, when I was pacing outside the building in despair, I wouldn't have dared hope for this. I'm glad that, despite being nervous, I forced myself to come. It was more than worth it.

Whenever I'm in a taxi I make small talk with the driver to practice my Spanish. I often see a photo of his family hanging from the mirror, and when I ask about it I usually get an answer I can easily understand. The fairly standard follow-up question is whether I have a boyfriend and where he is. At first I answered honestly that I didn't have a boyfriend, but later I bought a simple ring that I wear on the ring finger of my left hand to give the impression that I'm married. That makes little difference, though, because as long as *el marido* isn't around, anything is possible, right? I thought Cubans were direct, but Dominicans aren't much different in that respect. "Trying is always an option," seems to be their motto. I find it mostly exhausting. Besides that topic, I also practice my Spanish by negotiating the fare and which route will be taken. I get pretty good at it and can often even make a shorter route clear to the drivers.

On certain evenings of the week people dance in a nice, cozy little place, Canario Patio Lounge, near the city center. I know because a

Couchsurfing contact pointed it out to me. I also know where it is and therefore dare to go there by myself - at least the taxi driver can't pull a fast one on me. The dancing starts early enough and if it's not for me, I'll just take a taxi back home. As soon as I step inside I quickly scan the few people present and get an idea of who I would and wouldn't want to dance with. I walk through the room, enjoy the music, take a look at the inner courtyard behind the place and discover a poster for the Antillean festivities in Hoogstraten - the largest Caribbean festival in the world, held annually in Belgium. It feels like something from home. It's an old poster, but that doesn't matter. I enjoy myself and drift off dreaming about how small the world really is. Then an older gentleman asks me to dance and we go onto the dance floor. Although you can dance in any language, conversation is sometimes difficult because I'm not yet proficient in Spanish. After about an hour and a few dances I head home. That's enough.

As soon as Beckett hears about my plan to cycle to school, he warns me and goes for a ride with me to explain how Dominican traffic works. I think that's nonsense - I'm used to Amsterdam and The Hague and I've already cycled to the school once - but I find the gesture sweet and who knows what I'll see along the way with my personal tour guide. The nerve-wracking tour means that, on my first day of school, I'd actually prefer to take a public minibus; the traffic here is nothing like in the Netherlands. I pull myself together and set off by bike anyway. The first stretch goes through a beautiful park where no cars are allowed, so far so good. Then I come to a large road with an enormous intersection and I'm astonished at the chaos. It didn't look that busy before... It's clearly rush hour and I have to swallow hard before I dare go on. I pick my way between the cars and realize how lucky (and safe) we are in the Netherlands with all those bike paths. There isn't a bike lane to be seen here. I manage to reach the other side safely and continue on my way, occasionally checking a map to make sure I'm still going the right way. Surprisingly on time, I'm standing in front of the school. Made it. I feel proud, even though I'm not looking forward to

plunging into that chaos again this afternoon. "You'll get used to it," I tell myself and go inside.

The Spanish class is interesting, is taught in an enjoyable way, and I have nice classmates, including even a Dutch man, Wilbert. It's the first time since I've been here that I've spoken Dutch, except for the online chats with home. It feels strange and at the same time very familiar. The feeling triggers something... I flew here without an end date, with the wild idea that - if my money starts to run out or if the opportunity arises - I would go to work and perhaps settle where I happen to be. From what I've seen of this country so far, I wouldn't want to live here. But do I even want to live outside the Netherlands at all? The question has come up for me several times since I've been here, and the romantic image I had of it is becoming increasingly vague. I realize I've only just started my journey and that such a decision may take more time. Still, the contact with the Dutchman gives a special feeling; I notice that I miss my homeland, and I hadn't expected that.

In the afternoon I have my first dance class, which I'm really looking forward to. I have no idea what to expect, but apparently I did have an expectation, because I feel a slight disappointment when an old, small, stooped little man introduces himself as the teacher. On a whiteboard the man outlines the theory of dancing, or at least I assume that's what it is. He writes in Spanish. I can barely follow him, but I do my best; after all, I want to seize every opportunity and learn as much as possible. But hey, I'm here to dance. Suddenly he starts shouting and a boy comes in, who apparently is my dance partner. We dance and now and then I get instructions in Spanish that I again understand little of. But that doesn't matter; I'm finally dancing again!

I float home on my bike, in the wonderfully warm sun and with the sounds of salsa, merengue and bachata still in my ears and in my body. I barely notice the traffic. It's always so wonderful to dance. And luckily that will now happen at least every school day.