

## Life hunters

It is already 5:17pm, and my feet hurt. We have been walking down these avenues since early morning, to no avail. In fact, this is our seventh day of failure: we always arrive just a minute or two too late. To be perfectly honest with you, I would gladly give up for the day and return home. When the city reopened – 54 days ago, this was – I would wake up before dawn, tie my hair in a tight updo, drink a cup of coffee, and start knocking on Emma’s door. She wasn’t that keen then, you see, and I would sometimes have to knock until my knuckles went bright red. We would then set off in our little car and enter the city with the first rays of the morning sun. Cars cannot go past the old barricade, as the city has been declared pedestrian, at least for now. Out in the fresh air and phone in hand, we would walk up and down the town’s broad avenues and wait for a notification. My heart racing with excitement, I sometimes imagined the phone’s vibration – it was as though the trepidation of my own body flowed through the device, my body’s chemicals mixing with radio waves, leaping and twisting and swirling in a wild and long-forgotten dance. An actual notification in, we would dart (even at our age, yes!) towards the address, and laugh, and sometimes cry too. Once at the doorstep, and then in the apartment, we would be too busy to laugh, cry or even talk.

With time, more people started using the app, and it became increasingly difficult to arrive first. Our yield was getting slimmer and slimmer. In a strange way, my despondency grew stronger not with our failures, but with our ‘catches’. Every now and then, as we rummage through belongings, I find myself staring behind my shoulder, and getting this disquieting tingling sensation of someone observing us. I feel like a thief, or a voyeur, a criminal of some sort. There is nothing criminal involved in what we do, of course, it is as legal and as harmless as drinking orange juice or sitting on a beach to marvel at the waves. We feed on lives that have no one to claim them. Perhaps ‘lives’ is not even the appropriate word here. We feed on *records of lives*. A letter, a scarf, a portrait, magnets on a fridge, a photo album, a postcard, a book with a note, a vase or even a toy – these are our treasures. Some *Viz!-ers* would come out of the apartments with bags full of items. Not that there is any rule against this, but Emma and I both blush at the thought of appropriating belongings in this manner. Instead, we have our self-imposed regime: we are only allowed to take one item with us. For Emma, these items are usually clothing – clothing that she never wears. For me, they are pieces that I wouldn’t want to leave behind for others to see. I often find myself wondering how an object can carry so much of one’s soul, and how revealing it can be of human relationships. You take the object in your hand and you feel its owner’s presence so densely and deeply embedded in it that you have to look away. So, my harvest comes in all shapes and forms – it can be a small pencil sketch of one’s sleeping children, or a teacup painted by a child, with a clumsy “FOr MumMy” inscribed in the midst of an ocean of little hearts, a half-knit sweater or a half-filled crossword puzzle. It is these ‘half-finished’ ones that truly fascinate me – what emanates from their every fibre is the *process* of living.

But I stray... I was saying that some realisations finally caught up with me recently. There is this one thought that I cannot escape from. Initially, it was just a glimmer of doubt; then it grew and hatched and transformed into a small bird cosily nested in my mind; and now I have to live with it fully and unreservedly, as if it were a possessive and all-consuming partner. I oversimplify, but it has to do with the artificiality of it all. When the disease hit, no one expected that recovery would take almost five decades. In an ebb and flow of hope, towns were closing and reopening, closing and reopening, closing and reopening, until it became clear that the disease was growing stronger and more virulent, and that our meagre attempts to cure and contain it are miles away from what can stop it from spreading, multiplying, mutating. I was eleven when it all started. For three years, societies kept trying to get back to their routines. A decision had to be made, and a decision was made, just a week away from my fourteenth birthday. We closed. Those who could fled to the countryside, as we did, but many couldn't, either because they were too poor, too old or too attached. They stayed in the big cities, and the cities, disease-ridden, were sealed off – a siege of sorts, one with an invisible enemy. As particles could be carried through the air for months, life had to reposition itself, and it became concentrated within the walls of our houses. As a young girl, I imagined life as running water – it can fit any container, however small or twisted.

This image conjured again the pain in my feet. It's becoming unbearable. After days of walking without pause, the soles of my shoes started wearing off, and small holes were quick to appear. At the start, it felt manageable, but I soon realised that every little stone could easily invite itself in. When it rains, it's even worse, my feet get wet and cold and almost numb, so numb I am afraid I may fall. I haven't told Emma – we have enough to worry about financially, and a lot of our savings now go to the costs of these daily trips. When cities reopened, people started pouring onto the highways – have you seen ants crawling out of their colonies? That's exactly what it looked like. And, quite frighteningly, it seemed just as efficient and coordinated, as though instinct, rather than conscious thought, was behind the wheel. I haven't told Emma about my shoes, and I am afraid to tell her about my doubts. Hesitant at first, she now clings to *Vis!* much like a drowning person does to a floating raft.

I didn't explain what *Vis!* is, did I? While I am in pain, my thoughts get all jumbled and mixed up. When the barricades at the entrance of cities were finally lifted, what greeted the frightened state officials was deafening silence. Most of the residents left inside had died, be it of disease, age or loneliness. As the cities were to be made 'liveable' again, many local governments commissioned private companies to enter the houses and apartments, dispose of any human remains found on the premises, and tidy these places up for their new inhabitants. The entrepreneurial spirit awoke: these companies soon realised that they were sitting on a goldmine. In a society famished for 'real', 'normal' life, the flats full of belongings of what seems to be another world could, they speculated, become a new form of entertainment, somewhat educational, somewhat therapeutic. Combine this idea with

an understanding of our deep-rooted competitiveness and greed, and you get *Vis!*. *Vis!* is an app that tracks all the addresses where the disposal companies have gone to (just to collect remains, not more) and sends real-time updates to its users. A notification gives all *Vis!* users in the area an address, and those first to reach that address find a small envelope with a key. They can then spend up to three hours in the flat, foraging people's belongings, reading their correspondence, eating from their plates, and what have you. It may seem mad, but this is a way of establishing contact with a former 'self', if you like, of discovering a life many of us never got to live, of quenching our thirst for all the travel, romances, adventures that we could only read about. Many probably hoped, as I did, that we would find in these hints of another world the reassurance that life before was perhaps a bit too busy, a bit too crazy, a tad overrated. Instead, we all felt that it was exactly as we had dreamt and fantasised. Breathless, just as it has to be.

*Vis* in French means 'live'. There is some irony in the name, don't you think? *Vis!*, it tells us, it commands us to live. To live through an intermediary, that is. Were we to be truly honest about the nature of the exercise, we would have called it *vie*, life. A noun somehow seems more suitable than a verb for this context. I often wonder whether people think about the grammar of their lives – did they live a life of nouns, verbs, or adjectives? Is it possible to say? And are some ways of living better than others? Truth be told, I never understood this obsession with verbs at the expense of nouns. Nouns have a stability, a reality, a transcendence to them that is quite contemplative, and which seems to match my character. Yes, I think I lived a life of nouns.

Seven days ago, Emma and I got lucky and were notified of an address just a street away from us. We arrived seconds before two other women, what seemed to be a mother and a daughter, one likely in her seventies and the other a little younger than us. As we took the envelope with the key, I looked back and saw the elderly woman holding and gently whispering something to the younger one, who had silently burst into tears. I hesitated, but Emma was already in the foyer. We found the flat in disarray. The dust on the library shelves was as thick as a sponge, and the entire place had a foul smell to it. In a corner of the living-room, I found a box, and in it dozens of cards – for birthdays, Christmas, New Year's Eve, Easter... Some of the cards were hand-made, the drawings of a child, almost always little houses on a lawn, with a mountain in the background, and a smiling sun in the top-left corner. 'Dear Granny', they all started with. I remembered that I also used to draw such houses with disproportionately large chimneys and smiling suns and dedicate them to 'Dear Granny'. Could these drawings be mine? Every now and then, you hear of *Vis!*-ers discovering their own family houses, without knowing, and breaking down at the sight of memories from their youth. Perhaps they are the only successful ones. After all, can't it be said that the life we are hunting is actually our own?

Some people dealt with the re-opening differently. *Vis!* is only one coping mechanism in a burgeoning industry. Other companies offer to *create* the life you wish you had. After consultations, they develop stories of love, friendships, travel, danger – whatever you are

happy to pay for. Couples can receive pictures of their loving embraces in front of the Eiffel Tower or the cherry blossom trees of Kyoto, or even of extravagant and crowded weddings. Over dinner, they recount these made-up stories as memories, and quarrel when one of them 'gets things wrong'. The more ambitious have 'thank you' letters from presidents, commending them on saving the world from nuclear annihilation, or patents for discovering cures to cancer or Alzheimer's. I shiver at the thought.

My feet are almost numb again. Sorry, I've been rambling. Please don't ask me for advice, I have none to offer. We all cope in our own ways.

I, for one, became a life hunter.