Borderline

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LOCATION: TURKEY & GEORGIA

Cycling across the farthest corner of the Anatolian Plateau, the bitterest wind I'd ever experienced sliced over the treeless white hills. *You should have taken the Black Sea road*, it taunted. *It would have been wet, but not so cruel.* I ignored it, focusing on the false promises of the bright skies overhead. Their horizons hid a menacing secret: a snowstorm bringing temperatures colder than Siberia was rolling towards us.

Peppermint-coloured minarets broke the singularity of the landscape. At the base of the towers lay a village, but it showed few signs of life. Smoke coiled out of a single chimney. We pedalled on, three bicycles alone on the road, feeling the weight of the word remote. Wind carrying snow and dust threatened to tip us from our bikes as we crested the Sakaltutan Pass.

In a village in Posof, two women tending the little restaurant stared at us as if we were alien life forms. Trying not to dirty the floor with snow or mud, we tiptoed to an empty table. I ordered what I knew would be my last bowl of Turkish lentil soup, anticipating its savoury warmth.

Crossing the boundary between a stranger you just met and that person becoming a friend is a dance more reliant on serendipity than the skill of the dancers.

Someone had told me a few days ago that the Turkish word for snow, *kar*, is unrelated to the main city of the region being named Kars. This I doubted: snow was all we'd seen the past three days as we'd pedalled furiously north. When faced with the decision to stay in Kars until the blizzard passed, Antoine's brow became serious, and he eloquently argued, 'If it's going to be -15°C outside, I'm going to be snowed in with Georgian wine.'

Pooling the last of our lira we paid and put our balaclavas back on. As we rode away, shouts goodbye from schoolchildren followed us until we crossed an invisible limit when their cries were replaced by the *tch-tch-tch-tch-tch* of the wind against our jackets.

Across the valley, a thick forest clumped up the slopes facing us. Were they Oriental spruces? Or Caucasian firs? The snow weighed down their branches, concealing the differences between the two species. The resurgence of these evergreen trees marked the Georgian border. Until the day a line was drawn through its centre, the whole valley must have been a continuous forest.

Tapping the brakes, we coasted to the border crossing. On the Turkish side, the soldiers patted us on the back and shook our hands, while at the Georgian checkpoint 30m later bulky guards loomed inside the checkpoint stands. We realised when we approached the shed that they weren't bigger than the Turks – they were just wearing more layers of clothes. The guard held up Quentin's passport, tilting his head as if to suggest some discrepancy. Quentin pulled down his balaclava to reveal his unshaven cheeks and jaw. This didn't help his case; in the photo he was clean shaven. The man disappeared into the guardhouse with all three of our passports. Returning with them a few moments later, the officer smiled and said, 'Welcome to Georgia! Are you cold? It will soon be colder.'

Antoine started whooping as soon as we were liberated from the checkpoint. 'Waouh! We made it to Georgia!' Quentin and I joined in the celebratory shouting. Later, as we were cycling three abreast down the road, I asked, 'So... now what? We're in Georgia, but the snowstorm is still coming. Where do we wait it out?'

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Crossing the boundary between a stranger you just met and that person becoming a friend is a dance more reliant on serendipity than the skill of the dancers. The night after leaving Kars, serendipity danced. While taking a break at a tea house, we asked the men at a neighbouring table if they knew a place close by out of the wind where we could plant our tent. Within moments, it was arranged for us to sleep in the *ogretmenevi*, or teacher's house, across the street – on the condition that we return to play cards. The evening passed with the three of us seated at a table with our hosts, drinking strong tea and laughing like we'd all known each other for years, not hours.

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That perfect mix of circumstance and luck was not with us as we entered a place called Vale. Stratocumulus clouds leading the charge of the snowstorm had tinted the whole town an unwelcoming shade of pewter grey. We were on the main drag, but the weather had driven everyone inside, no doubt to huddle around their stoves, and nobody noticed the travellers passing outside their windows. The blizzard was still behind us. We could still push on.

Diamond-dust snow whipped our backs as we pushed our bikes up to the budget guesthouse in Akhaltsikhe where we were going to spend our newly acquired lari. We dumped our gear in the cramped Parisian-themed triple room and bottlenecked at the bathroom door, each of us hoping to be the first to take a hot shower. Later, standing on the wooden balcony, we dedicated our first bottle of Georgian wine to the blizzard's arrival. As we drank, snow fell more quickly and silenced the town. Satisfaction settled over us: tomorrow we'd have no choice but to stay put.

In the morning, as expected, the roads were snowed over. While eating salty omelettes and doughy bread, we decided that if we weren't going to be cycling we could try behaving like normal tourists. There was a ninth-century monastery 10km up the mountain through dense forest. Gearing up to go outdoors, we shared our plan for the day with the middle-aged guesthouse owner. 'No cars, too much snow,' she pleaded in broken English, her golden curls shaking from side to side. 'Go to the castle down the street.' Patting our thighs, we used universal sign language to show that we'd be going on foot.

'It'll take all day if we walk,' Quentin said with a devilish grin. He could have passed for a truant schoolboy, so flagrant was his pleasure in going against the guesthouse owner's advice. No tracks had yet broken the crisp snowfall until we began running up the road. Laughing and flinging snowballs at each other we bounded up the road. It was around -5°C outside but we were steaming.

The Sapara Monastery burst into view as we rounded a corner. Straight out of a holiday card, the sepia-coloured stone church was covered in snow. Tall, spindly trees framed the outside of the sanctuary, the bulk of snow on their branches opalescent as it shifted in the soft wind. Inside, a chill nipped at my neck. Despite the tourist pamphlets at the door, the monks largely ignored us, rustling around lighting candles in front of decaying religious reliefs. In Turkey, stopping at mosques to pad around the carpeted floors admiring the design was a soothing experience. How different the welcome on one side of a mountain range can feel to the other. Worried we'd catch a cold if we let our bodies cool down too much, we slipped out the door unnoticed and began the run back.

My toes began to burn. When I tried to squeeze them, they sluggishly curled in my boots. Worried about frostbite, I began to wiggle them with each downward pedal push.

Between the three of us, we discussed our desire to keep moving forward instead of staying in Akhaltsikhe. When we'd run out of town that morning, trucks were already working on clearing the road. The idea of cycling on to the former Soviet spa haven of Borjomi had taken root. 'It's 50km to Borjomi,' Antoine said with a hint of a smile. 'Along the river. A flat road.' ▸▸

‘The cold front hasn’t really come through yet.’ Quentin’s blue eyes sparkled and I sensed mischievousness again in his words. ‘The second wave of snow and the real cold temperatures will arrive tonight.’

I saw where this was going; they couldn’t resist getting back on the road. ‘So we leave Akhaltsikhe now, or in three days?’ I said.

The deciding factor was a loose interpretation of our goal for this leg: to cycle until the snowstorm caught us. Technically, it hadn’t. We’d press on.

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The road wasn’t flat but it had been salted. Though it was colder here than in Turkey, it felt safer to be enveloped in the forest than to ride exposed on the Anatolian Plateau. On a climb at a bend in the river, I struggled to shift my gears. It took a few kilometres to notice that blocks of dirty ice, almost opaque with grit and muck, had formed on my gear set. Splashback from the road had frozen on our bikes. ‘We’ll ask for some hot water at the next café,’ Quentin said.

My toes began to burn. When I tried to squeeze them, they sluggishly curled in my boots. Worried about frostbite, I began to wiggle them with each downward pedal push. Gusts of wind lifted fresh snow off the pine trees and blew it across the road, limiting our vision.

Neon lights of a roadside café glowed through the fog. Inside was a lone table, a wood fire, and a young couple. While we slurped bad instant coffee and inhaled candy bars, the wife heated a kettle for us to melt the icicles hanging off our bikes.

‘16km left,’ Antoine reported, his voice falsely cheerful. I began clenching and unclenching my fingers along with my toes. The minutes of remaining daylight ticked away. The gear sets, the brake cables and the forks became frozen in place by ice. Antoine turned his back to the road and peed on his bike to break it off. I wasn’t capable of executing the action as easily as the boys, so I rationed the hot water we had in our Thermos flasks to rinse my bike. Quentin huffed as he slid back onto his bike behind me. The pleasure of being on a winter adventure was fading. We’d found our border of what was fun and what was decidedly not fun.

Vacation units began to dot the riverbank – towering pink and green Communist-era buildings wearing their years with a certain charm. Their appearance unleashed new energy in us. Like horses who know they’re approaching the stable, our pace increased without discussion.

At dusk, our bodies stiff and cold, we arrived at the street where we’d be staying for the next three days. The temperature was near -10°C and snow was falling thickly, carpeting the ground in dense, loose flakes. An older couple climbed the hill ahead of us, clinging to each other as they slipped on the ice beneath the snow. The bikes, laden with all our gear, were worse than dead weight; after five days of mistreatment they were rebelling, dragging us back one step for every two we clawed forward. As we cobbled ourselves against a wall to avoid slipping back down the lane, Quentin rang the bell. Warm air washed over me as we were ushered inside. At the table glasses of fiery *chacha*, Georgian eau de vie, were waiting. Meeting the hosts, being shown around, unloading the bikes: it was all a blur.

Only when I relaxed did I realise how tense, and how tired, I was – but we’d made it over the borders we’d set out to cross. That night, Antoine hummed as he served generous portions of homemade chilli onto our plates. We sipped our second bottle of Georgian wine and began to discuss the past five days. What compels humans to push the boundaries, the limits, the borders? To see how far we can go. To see what’s different; to see what’s out there. And when the border cannot be pushed any more? We cross it.

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