

The Guise of Speed

I always thought I was fast. That's not so much a boast as an observation; my mind will race from one end of the earth to the other in a heart-beat, dragging along with it the burden that comes with interacting with all manner of kindred spirits in a fraction of a second. I will constantly be doing, deciding, thinking, moving, willing various energies into existence. Like a fission reaction with faulty control rods. I imagine that's not unique to me. In fact, I know it. Everyone's running their own race, and likely moving at near top-speed constantly to experience as much of life as one can in the short track of our lives. I only know that the speed at which I move is not sustainable.

That became evident three summers ago, on the seventh of August after a week-long trip with my girlfriend of the time, Eliza. It was a time I'd snuck an extra day in with her from my parents. She was my partner in crime. We ran all sorts of lights together; most of them flashing or red. I lived in a small city, Castelldefels, which is about forty-minutes south of Barcelona. If you know nothing about Barcelona as a city, know that it's where she's from and that it's fast. I'd often make my way to the train station from my place so I could see her. Trees rustled their leaves as I flew past the park just outside my house. I then hurried downwards into town, past the church in the centre, past the shops and restaurants, homing in on the station to catch a train that would send me straight to her. (Well, not *straight* to her. I had to pass through: *Gavá*, and its 1938 *refugi antiaeri* still by the station; *Viladecans'* malls and buzz and lights and nights; *El Prat*, and its many homeward-bound visitors a day; *Bellvitge*, and I'm not so sure what goes on there....)

The train would announce, "*Propera Parada: Barcelona Sants. Proxima Parada: Barcelona Sants*. Next Station: Barcelona Sants"; and I knew I was close.

I would rush off, carefully not minding the gap between the train and the platform, hurrying on to and through a crowded escalator, rushing past the ticket gate to find the blue metro line exactly where it ought to be, and to find myself *five, four, three, two, one* step from boarding; then another five, four, three, two, one stop away from a quick walk past the Sagrada Familia onto *Carrer de la Marina*, where I would press the buzzer for the second floor and be greeted by her mom, sister, or herself.

Eliza would have done all this in reverse—and likely much faster. She was, after all, a city-girl, and the one who taught me all about speed. I could have sworn when she hopped on a train it moved twice as fast, she was still always late somehow. I trained my speed for her.

Any semblance of patience and punctuality came from my parents training me. They disagreed with lots of parts of what Eliza and I had. They weren't huge fans of the stress we put on ourselves and the speed of it all. (In all fairness, she and I went from meeting: to sharing a bond: to sharing a bed, over the course of a fortnight.) They weren't fans of the way the ground would bend

beneath the burden of our love. The gravity of it all worked marvels for trains, the ground would depress, and the trains would speed up, finding themselves trailing downwards now. Really it was enough to make the world spin faster. We warped time. You couldn't see things like leaves moving anymore. The trees themselves blurred and shook, rocks would erode, storms would brew and die, and the sky would pause race through night and day just to keep up. The force of it all would rotate the Earth in our direction; and all so that a train could bring us closer together.

Safe to say, nothing could keep us apart. Don't get me wrong: the world tried. Lockdown came along and it was illegal to travel or to use trains. It felt illegal to love. Eliza wasn't one for rules though. She grabbed her old far-too-small and rusty bike and cycled for four hours through darkening skies and worries, with only faded rainbows and Hello Kitties radiating from her bike's paint to light the way towards me. I saw her, and couldn't believe it, "Hey love, you, okay?"

"Yeah. A little shook but yeah..." she said.

"How was the ride? You must be so tired... Come here," I guided her to a bench and held her.

"It was so *scary*. The first hour was okay. I mean, it was mostly flat, and no one was around so no one questioned me, it was actually pretty peaceful, then it started to go uphill, and it just kept going; then the cycle path ended, and I had to go on the road, so, I eventually went into a massive tunnel, and there was a truck. There wasn't a lot of space in the tunnel; I think he saw me last minute, but it was so close, and I..."

"I'm so sorry you went through that... I'm just so glad you're safe, and here. I'll do the cycling next time," I squeezed her and wiped her teary eyes, making a face to try and get a laugh.

She chuckled, "but... your parents won't let you."

"I'll just sneak out, it's fine. What are they gonna do, come cycle after me in the middle of a pandemic?"

"You still feel like home."

So, we both felt at home for a while by the train station, before heading back to my house. We sent her back home in a taxi a few nights later.

Lockdown had lifted by the time Eliza and I decided to go to her family place in Altafulla. I had told my parents that I would be spending the week with her and her family by this beautiful coastal town a few hours south. We left from her place, as standard. I made my way to Barcelona the night prior, to have a head-start on our wonderful week ahead. We whizzed our way through her street and onto the blue metro line towards the main train station. We arrive at Sants a few minutes before

our train departs. We rush through ticket gates, past escalators, and busy people, only after having glanced at a screen declaring *Fila 12* as the place to be, and onto platform twelve with a train awaiting us.

“Come on, Nik,” she motioned me forward.

Only, I had noticed that while the train was moving in the right direction it didn’t appear to have our stop but I could have easily been wrong. “I don’t thi—” was followed by a rapid series of beeps.

“Come on!” two things now let me know I was failing the test of speed. So, I moved without thinking and without a voice.

Halfway through the journey, Eliza realized our stop wasn’t on the screen, so I told her “I was trying to tell you before we jumped on. I was pretty sure ‘*Torredembarra*’ wasn’t on the stops for this train.”

“What?”

“As in our stop...”

“Yeah, I know that’s our stop. It’s missing from the fucking screen. Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I was trying to, but you seemed convinced and wanted to hop on—”

“Seriously Nik, like, why didn’t you just say something.”

“You’ve been doing this for much longer and you moved so quickly, I thought ‘Hell, it’s Eliza, I’m sure she knows what she’s doing’—”

“Well, now we have to just hope that they don’t fine us and that we can get off at some nearby stop.”

“I’m sure we’ll be okay. We’re two young people in love who made an honest mistake...”

“Sure,” and that was the last thing she said till we got off the train.

I spoke to the ticket collector and told him I was sorry for any inconvenience caused by our mistake, and he assured me there was no problem and we’d just get off at the next stop and wait for a train that would take us back one station. We joined her family at her place and had as interesting a week as can be expected from a couple who got together in two weeks, and resembled the couple in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

Then, last minute, her family decided they'd stay an extra night which, leaving the apartment back in Barcelona empty for the night. So, we decided that we'd leave Altafulla and make our way back— Bill Withers style. I didn't tell my parents about all this— I didn't fancy another argument in Love's supposed name, and so made the executive decision to have one more night with my girlfriend. We successfully hopped on a train which ran straight into the heart of Barcelona. Eliza and I had only spent a few hours together before she got a call from her friend who was having a rough time, "I'll be right over", she said as she looked at me.

"Go, go. I'll be here when you get back," she gave a smile.

"Let me just get changed *y estar de camino.*"

It was around 19:00 when she left. I took care of some things around the apartment. I took Sina for a walk, and fed her and the cats: Pinky and Blue. I walked 'round the familiar floor, trailing a broom as I went. Took the lonely mop from the cupboard and reunited it with its bucket and some water. I organized the kitchen for a while, and then found my way to Eliza's room and cleaned up a bit. There were always things on the floor, and on desk, and the bed... there were always things on her mind and somehow, they manifested into the state that was her room. I love cleaning and de-cluttering though, and she was a perfect mess. She texted me saying she'd be on her way back soon, and by now it was about 20:30.

Next thing I knew, it was about quarter-to-eleven at night— in Barcelona. Hardly a chance of letting a woman risk herself by walking home alone at this hour. Especially with the passion of summer in the air; a mix of piss and alcohol, blended with the sound of bars and clubs running through till daybreak. No chance I was letting her walk home alone. I told her I'd bring her skateboard and my bicycle (from when that debt of love was owed), "that way we can cycle and skate back here together, then we can watch a movie", and I added a smiley face.

"Okay! Sounds good! I'll see you soon," and she added a heart.

"Be there quick!!"

I grabbed my guitar case, thrust her skateboard into it as best I could, bolted down the stairs after saying goodbye to the guardians of the apartment, locked the door for them, grabbed my bike and made my way outside into *A Latesummer Night's Nightmare*. I loaded up her friend's address and flew across streets and pavements; traffic lights and zebra crossings seemed the same thing. The roads bent like light does when something moves infinitely faster than it— I made the mistake of thinking I was Infinity. Like some Icarian speedster, I found myself before a double street separated by a brief paving that ran down its center. A dead traffic light was the first thing I saw, it was on that island

between the two roads. I didn't think to look beyond it because where I came from, that small city, there was only one traffic light per street. And there was only one road that separated two pavements, not two roads and a raised medium. However, this was Barcelona. My seventeen-year-old self hadn't thought to look beyond the speed at which I was moving. To look beyond the first road and traffic light.

It's half-eleven.

I looked to my left and right, everything blurring into similar signals in my brain.

No one's around.

I was moving with the wind. Nothing could stop me. Nothing should've stopped me.

I'll just cross.

I knew it was against the law to cross on your bicycle. You must dismount and walk it across.

I'll just cross.

I made my way onto the road, certain that I was exactly at the pace I needed to be before the motorcycle to my left had the chance to outrace me. It was at that moment, in the middle of the road, alone and at night, that I felt all manner of speed leave me and my bike so that it and I both floated through the air in a surreal tranquility. It reminded me of the significance of patience, and punctuality. Eliza made her way to me eventually, after I explained to her, the police, and the ambulance, that I had just been in an accident, and how it was my fault. The police officer put my dad on the phone and handed him to me shortly after my dad told him, "That can't be right. My son's in Altafulla with his girlfriend, he wouldn't be in Barcelona."

"Hey Baba..."

Eliza and I made our way back to her apartment, me limping on my bike which moved like it'd been hit by a car, and her skating by, always that bit further ahead— that little bit faster. We broke up about a year later.

That was the first time I realized I'd never be quick enough for her.