A GIRL  A BIKE  A STREET DOG

SAVING LUCY

ISHBEL ROSE HOLMES

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WORLD BIKE GIRL
On my very first night cycling the world, with 65 pounds of luggage hanging from my bicycle, I realized I had forgotten to pack a lighter. I sat outside my tent in darkness, striking two pebbles together without success. Crawling into my sleeping bag that night, I was hungry and disappointed, knowing a real adventurer would have found a way to light her stove and cook dinner.

Five months later and pedaling across my tenth country, Turkey, I still yearned for the day I’d resemble an adventurer, but to date, I’d had too many hysterical moments involving spiders, slugs, and imaginary monsters to count myself as the real deal. Each night I wild camped, and every sunset brought along with it my three biggest fears: one, that human beings would find me and murder me; two, that animals would find me and eat me; and three, that a combine harvester wouldn’t see my tent and I’d be combine-harvested up.

I’d wanted to build a campfire many times along the way, but visions of burning down whole forests had stopped me. Today I
was about 125 miles past Istanbul, cycling a quiet coastal road along the Sea of Marmara. The empty winter beaches scattered with driftwood were inspiring me once more, and I decided that tonight, yes, I would build the first campfire of my trip. I smiled—one step closer to being a real adventurer!

It was late afternoon as I turned down a road to my right, leading me through a cluster of wooden houses and toward a beach. I stopped at a small village shop, dusty and packed full of everything you could possibly need, from DIY to cans of fruit; everything but customers.

Money was tight, and I deliberated greatly before buying an onion. I would cook that with tonight’s pasta, adding my remaining garlic to give it more taste. Only last week I had been down to my last twenty quid, but a Scottish company, Intelligent Data Group, saw my Facebook post declaring my plan to dumpster dive and donated some cash to keep me going. I knew the less I spent of it, the more days ahead I could eat. This struggle was nothing new. I had always travelled on a shoestring budget. I figured not having money was a small inconvenience for the priceless experiences that traveling by bicycle brought.

I arrived at the beach, empty but for a few dogs in the distance. The winter-gray sea and boarded-up tourist beach huts gave it an abandoned, derelict look. Although it was perfect for building a campfire, I had an uneasy feeling I could not shake. As a woman cycling the world on my own, I obeyed my instincts. Disappointed,
I turned back to cycle the way I’d come, with intentions of trying
the next beach along the way.

I took a final glance behind, hoping it would provide the
thumbs-up I needed to stay and build my campfire there. Instead,
I was greeted with the surprise of a light-colored dog padding
along the rear side of my bicycle. I grinned. During my bike
racing days, we were taught to ride in what’s called “the blind
spot” of the competitor in front; this tactic allowed us to remain
hidden while conserving energy. This dog was absolutely nailing
my blind spot!

I knew it was best not to acknowledge or feed random dogs
along my route. They could try to tag along, which was an impos-
sible situation for both parties. Other cycle tourers had warned
me, “Remember, you’re cycling the world; stray dogs are not
your problem!”

I ignored the dog and cycled back through the village and onto
the main road, vacant of traffic. I checked behind. The dog was
still there. Pushing on the pedals, I blasted away as only a pure
sprinter can, a human machine of fast-twitch muscles designed
for power and speed. I glanced behind once more. The dog was
running after me as fast as it could, trying to hold its position.
I noticed its moving shape was odd—the dog was definitely limping.

I kept on, faster and faster, repeating the mantra, “I’m cycling
the world and stray dogs are not my problem!” A long, gentle
downhill ensued, which was enough to give me the extra speed
I needed. The dog fell behind. Another glance to the rear, and I
could still make out its shape, which was now just a small dot in the distance. For the love of God, why was it still running? Give up, I pleaded silently to it. Give up.

A voice within me, starting out as a whisper but then silently screaming until it could not be ignored, cried, “Ishbel, this is wrong; what you are doing is wrong!” I pulled the brake levers and stopped. Turning around, I waited in hope the dog wouldn’t reach me. If it did, I would just have to deal with the situation I found myself in. Eventually the dog arrived, panting hard, and dropped to the ground a few feet away. I held out my hand as an offering of peace and spoke softly. It kept its distance. This dog confused me. I hadn’t spoken to it or given it food. I hadn’t even acknowledged it. Why would it chase me so hard and for so long, and then refuse to even come near me? This dog was weird.

I let the dog rest a few minutes and then began wheeling my bike along the road, unsure what to do next. The dog followed behind. I rolled my eyes. Building my campfire like a real adventurer would have to wait another day; instead, I would camp here, in the sloping field.

The deep, rippling furrows of soil, which farm machinery had prepared for planting, made it difficult terrain for a fully loaded bicycle. Putting my head down and ignoring the pain in my shoulders, I pressed against the handlebars and used all my body weight to push the bike onward, until I could move forward no more. With no hedgerows, the dirt field lay exposed to the
road, and I hoped I was far enough away that people in passing cars wouldn’t notice me camping in the night.

The dog lay in the earth and watched me from a distance as I pitched my tent. I watched her back as I waited for my pasta to boil. She was a female, so thin her bones stuck out. One of her paws was deformed, and I wondered what had happened to it. Why did she limp? Was she in pain? She had a pink plastic circle in her ear. I wondered what it was. Maybe it was from her family, like a dog-collar tag in Britain. If she did have a family, I didn’t like them much because they didn’t look after her. But then I remembered that some people in Turkey struggled to feed their own children.

I felt bad for her, but I didn’t know how I could help. I ate half the pasta and held out the rest for her to eat. Still she refused to come near. I left the pot on the ground some distance away. Jesus. Even a starving dog wouldn’t eat my cooking.

My thoughts drifted to my ex-boyfriend and how we had laughed when I declared I didn’t need to be good in the kitchen when my bedroom skills were so good. No matter how much I tried not to think about him, I always did. Before committing to this idea of riding the world, I had asked him if we could try again, and with a broken heart I’d accepted that we couldn’t. He had begun university to progress his career and said he didn’t trust himself not to fail if I walked out a second time declaring I didn’t love him.

He had a point. We had fallen completely, madly in love, and I had reacted by finding lots of things wrong with him that
needed changing. He had tried hard, but I went on to destroy our relationship with excruciating brilliance. What I had done made no sense at all.

I finally figured out that I was too damaged to love or be loved. And with that awareness came determination and a certainty that I could change.

Tidying up after dinner, I emptied the uneaten pasta into a garbage bag. The dog was still watching my every movement. Once I moved away, she went over to the open bag and began eating. I felt even sadder for her.

It grew dark, and I was tired. I spoke a few gentle words of good night to the dog, climbed inside my tent, and zipped it closed. I felt the warmth of my sleeping bag and immediately felt guilty. Pushing away thoughts of fleas, I unzipped the tent and began patting the ground to invite her in. She didn’t budge. I sighed and zipped myself back in. I was glad she had eaten, but I hoped she would be gone when I woke up. There was no way this dog was coming with me.

When I awoke the next morning, my first thought was, “I hope the dog’s gone.” In fact, it was more than a hope. I prayed she wasn’t there as I put on yesterday’s clothes in the tiny space that was my one-person tent. She wouldn’t be there, no way. She had been petrified of me.

Unzipping the tent, I hunched my way out into the early morning sunshine. There was the dog, lying beside the garbage bag. This wasn’t good.
“Hello, girl!” I mustered a cheery call, hiding my disappointment. She moved farther away. Why on earth did she hang around when she was so scared of me?

Not knowing what best to do, I stood scanning the farmland, spying only a country road and a scattering of farmhouses in the distance. I thought about the village where she had joined me. She was painfully thin and obviously had some past injuries, and yet she had somehow managed to survive. I decided I would take her back to the beach where she had begun following me. Perhaps the tag in her ear was from her family and I could find them around there. Or maybe someone would recognize her and claim her. There was no other option. Coming with me was out of the question. I was cycling the world.

I ate some bread and offered her a piece, but she refused, so I threw it at the garbage bag and sure enough she gobbled it up. I packed up and slowly pushed the bicycle back over the ploughed field with the dog following behind. We reached the desolate tarmac road and I cycled slowly so that the dog could keep up, glancing behind to make sure she was okay. I had no idea why she limped, and I didn’t want to put her through unnecessary pain.

We arrived back at the village and the dog moved out in front, which gave me hope that she thought this was home. Angry barking came from a field on my right, and suddenly four dogs ran out across the road. I shouted out, but they reached her and attacked all at once. To my horror, the dog didn’t run. She didn’t fight back. She just lay down. She just lay down and accepted
what was happening—the dogs snapping at her injured hip and leg with sharp teeth bared and saliva flying.

In that moment, I was transported back to being 16 years old in the back of a car, in a moment when I didn’t fight back. I hadn’t cared enough to fight back. For months before, I’d lain in bed every night, silently screaming, sometimes punching the pillow but mostly punching myself. My face was swollen and red from tears as I promised God or the universe or whoever was in charge of the world that I’d be a good girl if I could just have my family back. But no matter how much I promised, nothing changed. I was on my own, in foster care, surrounded by strangers and far away from home. That night in that car, I eventually stopped saying no and simply stared out the window into darkness, grateful to finally be punished for being so horrible that my own mum didn’t want me.

I threw down my bicycle and ran screaming toward the dogs with a force I’d never known. I kicked and pulled at the snarling animals, screaming until they ran away. She was lying on her side, and I knelt down, tears filling my eyes. She moved her head just enough to lick my hand. Her big chocolate-brown eyes looked into mine and melted my heart. I told her she was a good girl, and in that moment I named her Lucy.

Looking her over, I couldn’t see any wounds. I stood up and walked a few paces away with my back to her, tears rolling down my face. Why had she just lain there? Why hadn’t she run? Why hadn’t I run all those years ago? I scolded myself and angrily
wiped the tears from my face. Lucy didn’t need my tears, she needed my help. Just as I had needed help years ago—help that never came. Taking a few deep breaths, I crouched down beside her. I smiled and patted her, telling her softly that everything was going to be okay.

As I stood up, so did Lucy, and she nuzzled into my leg. Together, we walked the bike to the village shop that I’d visited the day before. I told Lucy to wait outside with my bicycle, and then laughed at myself. How would she even understand me? Not only was she a dog and I human; she was Turkish and I was British. Yet, somehow, talking to her seemed to bring us closer.

The elderly shop owner was happy to see me again and began chatting away, not bothered that I understood nothing. I tried to explain to him about the dog outside. He didn’t comprehend. I took him outside and pointed to Lucy. He smiled, nodding his head, and then disappeared back inside the shop. He reappeared, throwing bread to Lucy. My heart warmed. What a lovely man. Then he motioned for me to cycle away while she was distracted eating the bread. I said no, that I wanted to make sure she was okay. He nodded that he understood, but to my shock he began running toward Lucy, waving his hands and shouting at her. She ran away as fast as she could. He looked back at me, pleased for helping, but I was horrified. I said good-bye and thank you in one breath and got on my bike, cycling in the direction she had run, desperate to see her again. But she was gone. I finally turned around, consumed by an overwhelming sadness, and
pedaled slowly back to the main road. Well, it was better this way, I thought.

I was just putting my foot on my pedal to accelerate when . . . movement. I looked back, and there was Lucy running as fast as she could across the village toward me. Watching her distorted shape pound ever closer gave me a rush of absolute joy. I got off the bike. Kneeling down, I stretched out my arms and waited for her with a big smile on my face. She reached me with such force that she almost knocked me over, and I scooped her into my arms, telling her over and over what a good girl she was.
Lucy’s first time inside my tent.
Typical travel mode: Lucy in the box and me petting her head to keep her calm.

Lucy trying her new luxury trailer on Calis Beach.
A needed break as I cycled my 200-pound load toward Hatay.
Turkey has one of the most incredible coastlines of any country I have visited.

Enjoying breakfast with Ummu in her home.

Herding goats with Toygar while Lucy played with the farm dogs.
Ishbel Rose Holmes, a.k.a. World Bike Girl, is a British Iranian adventurer who is scared of spiders. In 2014, she set off to bicycle the world and has so far pedaled across 16 countries in Europe and South America. She cycles with a dog trailer that she uses to rescue animals, helping injured cats and dogs get medical care and find homes. Before cycling the world, Ishbel was a track sprinter for the Iranian National Women’s Team, and she has also road raced extensively in the United Kingdom. Ishbel is devoted to the social, environmental, and health benefits of commuting by bicycle. She gives talks all over the world about her adventures and street dogs. And she is a motivational speaker for school children and community groups, promoting the positive effects of adventure and the great outdoors on mental health and quality of life.

Ishbel is an avid wearer of socks with sandals—much to the dismay of her friends.
Ishbel Rose Holmes is lost and alone when she sets out to cycle the world. A courageous free spirit, the former pro bike racer is both seeking adventure and hoping to escape the ghosts of a troubled past. But as she pedals solo across Turkey, an injured, starving street dog crosses her path and changes her life forever.

_Saving Lucy_ is the inspiring true story of Ishbel’s attempt to rescue the dog from the streets. Sensing similarities between her own life and that of the lonely, abandoned dog, Ishbel is determined to find Lucy the “happily ever after” she herself has never had. She attaches a crate to the front of her bike and sets a course to bike Lucy nearly 400 miles to the Syrian border, where the promise of a new life awaits. Along the way, Lucy breaks down the barriers around Ishbel’s heart, as Ishbel realizes it is she herself who is being saved by the dog she is trying to rescue.

“Even though I knew one hand reaching out could change everything for Lucy, there was simply no way I could transport her 370 miles. I was on a bicycle. It was impossible.”

Ishbel is an incredible and determined woman whose emotional story takes you on a journey of tears, laughter, hope, and inspiration. Beyond inspiring!

—DION LEONARD, AUTHOR OF _FINDING GOBI_