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Scissors

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Study Abroad Essay Contest
Sharon Gollery

“Scissors”

Budapest, Hungary, May 22, 2013. I’m sitting in the bathroom of my hostess’s apartment, trying to remember what they say about girls and their hair. Something about how a change in hairstyle reflects a change in a girl’s life, isn’t it? Like how some women dye their hair after a big breakup? My reflection stares back at me unhelpfully. Oh, well. I run the comb over my head a few more times, and then exchange it for my scissors.

It had started with a mistake. A summer gone by too fast, too much time spent with friends and family, a foolish hope that the San Francisco consulate would be able to fit me in at the last minute. All in a day, it seemed, I’d tossed my own hopes and dreams in the garbage. And I hated myself for it.

It was hard, hard, to go back to Linfield that fall. “Didn’t you say you were going to be in France?” my friends would ask, and I would look away and mutter something about a problem with my visa application. I couldn’t look in a mirror without wanting to smash it. I didn’t want to have to see my own face.

But I had to keep going. There was still the spring semester to consider, and what on earth was I going to do with my major? I found a solution on the website of my chosen program. The language major required two semesters in France; the American University Center of Provence offered a short summer term. One semester in spring plus one semester in summer would be two semesters. The International Programs Office couldn’t organize a summer abroad for me, but I could do it myself. I could pay for the tuition. I could schedule my own return flight. It could all *work*.

I didn’t believe it would, not really, not until I had landed at the airport in Marseille, not until I’d gone home with my host family, not until one evening in mid-February when I was exiting a *salon de thé* with some friends. As the cooling air rolled over us, my friend Kelley turned to me and exclaimed, “On est en France!”

I didn’t get it. Of course we were in France. There we were, walking up the Rue Joseph Cabassol. “Oui...?” I ventured.

Kelley grabbed my shoulder, dancing a little with excitement. “Sharon, écoute. *On est en France!*”

This was real. This experience, the cobbles under our feet, the sky above our heads, it was all real. I felt a smile begin to spread across my own face.

My time in France was filled with moments of realization. There was the time outside of Saint-Rémy when the wind was coming down off the Alpilles and rustling the leaves of an ancient olive orchard and lifting my hair away from my face. There was the first time I was mistaken for a local by an American tourist. There was the end of our spring break, when Kelley and I returned from a trip to the U.K. to discover that the trees were suddenly in leaf, and it had felt like coming home.

The experience had changed me. I suddenly found myself reacting to situations with a confidence and quiet optimism that was much deeper and more

genuine than any of the vivid spikes of self-assurance I had felt as a teenager. I liked it. And I wanted more.

So, one day, I hopped on the bus to Marseille, rode to the Gare Saint-Charles, and bought myself a Eurail pass. I had three weeks of vacation before the beginning of my summer term, and I didn't intend to waste them. I rolled up four shirts, five pairs of underwear, and packed them tightly into my backpack along with a change of socks, a water bottle, a small towel, my camera, and any small tools I might conceivably need – a miniature Leatherman tool, a luggage lock that would fit through the holes in my backpack's zipper pulls, and my palm-sized pair of sewing scissors.

Snick, snip, snap.

Damp hair falls away in curls. It's not a drastic haircut, just a few inches off the ends, but it feels like a declaration. I lower my hand and stare into the mirror.

"You don't scare me," I tell my reflection, wagging the scissors at it. "I'm traveling Europe by myself with only a backpack. I've stayed in hostels and in people's spare rooms. I've waded through a flood in Venice and I figured out the Budapest subway system in one day. Tomorrow I'm going to Prague. You can come if you want, but you can't slow me down anymore."

I sweep up my fallen hair into the garbage, gather my toiletries, and turn off the bathroom light on my way out.