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Beyond the Pond: My Semester Abroad, Converted into Creative Nonfiction

By

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English: Writing and Mass Communications

A Thesis Submitted to Fulfill the Requirements of the Honors Program at Assumption College

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Author's Note

For my senior thesis, I have written a collection of creative nonfiction stories about my semester abroad in London in the spring of 2016. When I started to develop this project, I intended on doing a scientific/psychological study on anxiety. This then transformed into anxiety of writers, travel anxiety, and finally, a personal journey about my study abroad experience. I have read an extensive amount of peer-reviewed research articles on anxiety, traveling, and studying abroad. I have also read collections and memoirs of creative nonfiction. These include:

- *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- *Notes from a Small Island* by Bill Bryson
- *The Best of American Travel Writing: 2009*
- *The Kindness of Strangers* by Lonely Planet
- *Thoreau's Rooster*
- *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed

Notes from a Small Island was not read in full.

Creative nonfiction is a genre that consists of dramatized, true stories. They are portrayed through literary elements commonly used by poets and fiction writers. These elements include dialogue, a replication of scenes, character development, and detailed descriptions of setting and interior thought. Creative nonfiction allows the writer to find meaning beyond his/her experiences and reflect on universal and personal issues.

When I set out to write, I intended on writing one longer story that brought each individual experience together. As a final product, my thesis stands as a collection of different trips and events that all contributed to my time in London. Breaking up my thesis into separate chapters has been a visual representation of what the semester was like for me: I've captured

distinct moments that can stand as independent pieces. But I've also joined them based on themes of self-discovery, nature versus city, and vocational exploration. I studied at Richmond, the American International University in London. There, I was enrolled in four courses relating to my English: Writing and Mass Communications major. My four courses were Travel Writing, Photojournalism, Video Production, and Shakespeare and His World. I also visited neighboring countries, including France, Scotland, Wales, Switzerland, and Italy. In my writing, I focus on exploring cities and their cultures through traveling. I do not include much information about my classes because I learned more outside of the classroom. This does not mean that I do not value the education and knowledge I gained at Richmond University. However, making new friends, sightseeing and exploring new cultures were more transformative experiences than my academic studies.

Richmond University is affiliated with the American Institute for Foreign Study, or AIFS. The university has two campuses in London: Richmond Hill and Kensington. About 200 students were in my study abroad program that semester. There were a handful that came from other countries like France and Canada, but the majority of students were American.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me write this piece. Professor Land has been a great mentor to work with and has helped me stay focused and positive while writing. I appreciate all feedback from my mentor and the faculty serving on my thesis defense committee. I am grateful for the support from my roommates, my family, and my friends at Assumption and in London.

I have received permission from my friends to be featured in my thesis. All quotes and information are gathered from my records of photos, my daily journal, my weekly blog, souvenirs, and interviews with my friends during and after our semester. The following people

serve as characters in my collection:

- 1) Cait Corie
- 2) Claire Eagle
- 3) Michaela Honigman
- 4) Zachary Heller
- 5) Emily Rawden
- 6) Vanessa Cunha

These six people were the major characters in my collection. Other minor characters included Eliana Glickman, Fraser Duff, and my surfing instructors Will and Davey. Without these people, my experience abroad would not be as meaningful.

I do not intend for this collection to be a How-To Study Abroad guide. Each student's experiences are subjective and personal. I can give insight into places and what the culture there is like, but my story is not a substitute for anyone's travels. Perhaps a project like this can be used in future study abroad programs to give students general ideas of what to expect. Until then, thank you for being a part of this story.

Prologue: Hyde Park

“What does ‘E.R.’ stand for?” the girl to my left asked. I had met her in the airport. *Rachel? No. Mary? Doesn’t seem right. Vanessa! That’s it!* She was pointing to a lamppost at the gated entrance.

I was wondering the same thing. Was it Latin? Was it a name? I had no idea. I felt clueless about a lot of things, minus where I was standing. I was walking through Hyde Park with a tour group. It was my first afternoon in London, and the weather was exactly what I expected. Overcast, misty, and cold. Except there was a slight break in the clouds. I took it as a sign. The semester wouldn’t be so bad!

I was trying to talk myself into a good mood. I was running on 20 minutes of sleep in the past 30 hours. I was all out of sorts, in a foreign country where I knew absolutely no one.

I looked back at the girl standing next to me. She looked excited, slight bags under her eyes, but definitely more lively than me. I hoped I look that eager to be there too. I definitely wasn’t feeling it.

“‘E.R.’ stands for ‘Elizabeth Regina,’” our tour guide answered. He was slightly stout, and to my disappointment, no accent. I missed his name, maybe David? Definitely an American impersonating a true Brit. I cracked a smile. *Wait ‘till they hear my impersonation of a British accent.*

“‘Regina’ is Latin for ‘Queen,’” David said. “E.R. also stands for ‘Edward Rex.’ Not entirely sure on that lamppost. It’s marked to identify which King or Queen was in power when it was erected. The letters themselves are called the ‘Royal Cypher.’”

I wanted to be so famous someday that I could have my initials on everything. For everyone to recognize my face and know my name. For a big accomplishment. I never wanted to

be born into royalty; I wouldn't have had to work for my fame. Plus, I was not a high-class person. I was all about humble ideas and humble dress, no top-of-the line designers or extravagant estates. I had no chance, nor a real desire, for a life of royalty. I was never attracted to the high life. Would I love to meet the Queen? Absolutely! But I was not breaking my back to woo Prince Harry. Not to mention, I was literally far from fame. No royal family for miles. Prince William and Duchess Kate no longer lived at Kensington Palace. They had moved to Windsor to raise George and Charlotte.

Fame wasn't on my agenda. I was a third-year college student from the smallest state in America. I was just starting the biggest and most terrifying adventure of my life: a semester abroad in London. No language barrier. *Thank God*. Just attractive accents and the perfect place to study English. I wanted to be a writer someday, and this was a good place to get started: to see the world beyond my confining bubble of the past 20 years.

Seeing the birthplace of Shakespeare and a country with so much history would get any English major excited. A semester abroad was not for me to "get discovered." It was for me to discover myself. To discover the world beyond my undergraduate college and beyond New England.

Beyond New England... And into "old" England. AKA the U.K., AKA the British Isles, AKA Great Britain. And I was standing in front of a place I had only heard about and seen in pictures.

I have never been excited to tour castles and walk through royal residences. But seeing them in person was different. Knowing I would see Kensington Palace, I researched it beforehand. With these new facts bouncing around my head, I planned to show up all of the other students and answer the guide's questions.

The site for Kensington Palace was first used in 1605. There was a house built there for Sir Walter Cope. In July 1689, William III and Mary II bought Nottingham House, the house on site, from the Earl of Nottingham. It was later transformed into Kensington Palace. Not that I was crazy about the royals, but I did wonder what the inside of the palace looked like. Did they sit on thrones of gold in the bathroom? Did they have silk sheets to sleep in and a buffet for dinner every night? Or was this just for the modern family?

Other people had inhabited the palace over the years, including Queen Victoria. On May 24, 1899, the public first had access to the state apartments in the Palace. It was completely restored after incendiary bombs damaged the Queen's apartments in October 1940. In September 1977, Princess Diana's funeral cortege left from the Palace for her funeral ceremony (Historic Royal Palaces: Kensington Palace). I did have a slight interest in Princess Diana. I remember hearing about her death on the news and how tragic it was. If she left such a lasting impression on the world, I wanted to understand what she was all about.

Today, different parts of the Palace are open to the public. The royal family still lives here too. I needed to plan time for a tour. It was more of an opportunity based on being there, not an attempt to cross oceans just to see the royal family. If I passed Kate on High Street Kensington, I would absolutely take a creeper pick of her.

Just a few hours before, I had stepped off the plane at London Heathrow Airport. Overtired, yes, but nerves and adrenaline kept me awake. I didn't relax until I found the school's van drivers at baggage claim and we made it safely to the Richmond University Kensington campus. I was dreaming to meet the Queen, despite my distaste for the royal life. After all, she is the Queen and has power over all of England. I'd give her my best imitation of a royal wave, although with my luck, I'd accidentally swat her in the face and be locked in royal prison.

Now, I stood before the first thing on my sightseeing list. The students in my group, all around my age, give a year or so, had the same level of exhaustion and confusion and anticipation I did. But I felt completely alone. I knew *no one*. No one from Assumption or my hometown decided to study abroad in London. Some people went to the Assumption campus in Rome. Others went to Ireland or Prague. Instead, London called me. It was an easier route, studying in a country that spoke English. I felt like I cheated the system. Learning a new language and living in a foreign country for four months was more than I could handle. So, London it was, all by my lonesome.

Actually, I wanted to be alone. Assumption was a small school of about 2000 undergraduates. I was too comfortable there, and I was sick of seeing the same faces every day. It was *my* desire and *my* decision alone to do a semester abroad. It was something I wanted to do since I toured colleges five years ago, and it was about time I made a big decision for myself.

The idea of studying abroad always *sounded* great, but I had my doubts if it would *actually* be great. The vast greenness and open air of Hyde Park calmed my nerves a bit. I felt free after being cramped on the airplane. Just past Kensington Palace was a wide walkway that branched off to other paths across the park. On the opposite side of the pathway was a pond. LIKE THE DUCK POND AT ASSUMPTION! As much as I wanted to get away from my small school in Massachusetts, it was my frame of reference. Perhaps because it was the only other college I knew, and it had come to be my second home. This duck pond in Hyde Park was a lot larger and there were other animals besides ducks. There were geese and swans and pigeons and at least four other types of birds.

As we walked over, I watched people stretch out their arms to the birds, extending handfuls of food. One lady held out chunks of bread in her palm. A pigeon flew up to her and

landed in the middle of her hand. She jumped at the sudden movement and nibbling sensation. I laughed at her reaction, but I also secretly knew that I would've done the same thing.

The air was filled with the sounds of squawking birds and chiming bicycle bells and barking dogs and distant conversations. The city park was buzzing with activity. We didn't have time to explore the rest of the park. There were many more paths and monuments I had yet to discover. The statue of Peter Pan and the Serpentine Lake were on my Hyde Park Must-See List.

Amidst all the action, I felt at peace. I had made it to London. After months of paperwork and running around campus, approving classes and mentally preparing myself for traveling, I was finally here. I took a deep breath, deciding this was only the first time I would walk to Hyde Park. This would be my happy place. This would be my home for the next four months. *I'm here, your Royal Highness!*

Beyond the Grounded Eye

Cables. The whole thing was made up of cables. Strong and thick, left and right, stretching from the ground to the base of the wheel. A cable at the back, and A-frame legs attached at the spindle. Smaller, shorter cables connected the spindle to the wheel, set up like a bicycle. From a distance, the cables looked like lines hanging in mid air. Free, like my newfound spirit abroad. Up close, I realized the cables were all secured in the ground, or to another structure in the ground. The only real line was the one we had to wait in for the London Eye. My study abroad program reserved tickets for every student, and we had a two-hour time slot to board before they expired.

It was the start of my second weekend in London. In those two weeks, I walked more than I ever had in a semester. I rode the tube around the city, but I walked from stop to stop, averaging about ten miles a day. The closest tube stop to the Eye was Westminster, on the other side of the bridge. Walking across was chilly and crowded, and waiting by the water for the ride was no warmer or less congested. The Eye was located on the South Bank of the Thames. Being the 23rd of January, we were all bundled up in our winter boots and warmest coats. I zipped my purple North Face fleece to the top and pulled my scarf around my neck. My jacket was so soft that as we waited in line, my friends petted my arm. I was like a household animal, stroked and poked by a bunch of strangers. *What an odd way to meet people.*

Despite the cold air and strange social interactions, I met new people in the study abroad program. I got to know some people better, particularly the ones living in my flat and who had ridden on my plane from Boston Logan. Others, I got to know for the first time... Or the twelfth. I couldn't tell the difference. There were so many faces I recognized, but people threw a lot of

names at me during the first few weeks of the program. I constantly asked, "Sorry, who are you again?"

Standing in line, with nothing else to do, I took lots of pictures. A steel cable from the left, then a shot from the right. A group of my friends jumped in the photo, huddling together for the picture and the warmth. Then we rearranged and took it again. There was nothing too exciting from the back of the Eye, just cables. We passed around phones, putting each other's numbers into Contacts lists. I finally had the chance to match names to faces.

We got to the Eye around 1 p.m., but we didn't board until about 3 p.m. The area was a major tourist trap. People walked along the South Bank to take pictures of the Eye and Big Ben across the Westminster Bridge. They sought out other activities too: the London Aquarium, the London Dungeon, Madame Tussaud's, and the Shrek Adventure store. We were only there for the Eye.

It opened in 2000, in celebration of the turn of the century. It stood 135 meters tall, and carried nearly 15,000 people every day (London Eye Facts and Figures). There were 32 capsules to represent the 32 boroughs of London. Each capsule could fit about 25 people. Standard tickets ranged from £20 to 30.

We crawled towards the front of the line. There were about 50 people in front of us, and our school group was over 150 students. Tired faces and rosy cheeks shared travel plans and stories from home. I missed my family and friends at school. They were the only people with whom I'd traveled. I wanted to hear *their* stories and *their* voices. The newness of the people in the program and my surroundings overwhelmed me. Not a paralyzing worry, just one that lingered.

We finally approached the ramp up to the platform. Employees saw us and set up a green screen for pictures. The green screen turned out to be the London Eye at night. Being the new Londoners that we were, we had to take advantage of the photo opportunity. Only four people were recommended in a photo, but we crammed in ten. My hair was windswept and cold. I refused to take off my jacket for pictures.

After three shots, we walked up another ramp to the boarding platform. The Eye moved in a clockwise direction, only stopping for people with disabilities or who desperately needed it slowed down. It was a quick jump from the platform to the capsule. Just a hop, and I was on the largest Ferris wheel in the world.

The capsule was an oval, with walls made of weatherproof glass. In the middle, there was a wooden bench shaped like a surfboard. Rails were built to lean on around the perimeter, and a kiosk desk displayed information about the different landmarks visible on the ride. We all scurried to the back of our capsule for the best view. Each ride took about thirty minutes, so it was a slow and steady pace. As the Eye rotated, the capsule rotated in its own mounting ring. It stayed horizontal and we had no chance of riding upside down. *Praise be to the engineers!*

I was anxious to take pictures the second I stepped on board. I was anxious to see the rest of London. I was anxious to meet people to share my experiences with. I had a churning stomach as we rode along, nervous and animated. I had to be patient and wait until our capsule was at least a third of the way up; that was where the best view was.

The first thing I recognized was Big Ben and Parliament. They were painted with streaks of light. The afternoon sun peaked out, and I could see sunrays streaming through the clouds. What a view. I watched as other things came into view. Shakespeare's Old Globe Theatre, Buckingham Palace, St. Paul's Cathedral, and building after building for miles.

I walked to the front and saw a tower in the distance, outside of the city. For a split second, I thought it could be the famous Parisian landmark. “Ashley, is that the Eiffel Tower?” I asked the girl standing next to me. I immediately realized how stupid and geographically wrong that sounded. I was just so excited to see the Eiffel Tower that I wanted it to pop out of thin air. Or transform a cell tower, which is what I actually saw.

“Hmm. Maybe. Yeah it might be!” She was trying to be polite. I asked other students who were on board, and someone finally had the nerve to tell me it was just a cell tower. The Eiffel Tower was across the English Channel and out of sight. There was no possible way to see it from London.

Imagine. You are on a landmark known worldwide that thousands of people ride each day. You are towering high above a city of over eight million people. Thank goodness I didn’t have a fear of heights. The height wasn’t what scared me, but the perspective. I was one person among so many, a newbie in a foreign country, in one of the biggest cities in Europe. Never had I felt so small and lost among a crowd. How could I have mattered so much in a world of people trying to make something of their lives every day, just like me? What made me different from the person towering over the Thames next to me, the people in my capsule, the rest of London, the rest of the world?

I wanted to stay high above it all for as long as I could, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. I was in awe of the view, and I did not know when I would be back to the London Eye again. It was breathtaking. I had only been taken aback by views like that a few times in my life. There are great views from hikes and tall buildings. But I could best relate this view to that of the Cupola at St. Peter’s Basilica. Hundreds of feet in the air, overlooking tiny forms in big places. St. Peter’s overlooked Vatican Square and the streets of Rome, and London overlooked

the Thames and Westminster area and the rest of London. It was then that I could see just a fraction of the people that lived in the city. I didn't appreciate the size of such a populated place until I saw all of it from above.

I could have walked around the capsule for hours, looking at London from every vantage point. We took group pictures with our touristy selfie sticks, throwing up peace signs or pulling our tired faces into tired smiles. But the view reenergized me. I was tired of walking and being overwhelmed by the sightseeing we had done since we arrived. As I stepped back onto the platform at the base of the Eye, I realized just how much more I had to see in my four months abroad.

My friends and I split up into two groups. I hung around in the gift shop for a while. I decided to buy the overpriced and digitized picture of our friends on the Eye. We bounced around different shops on the Bank strip, waiting for the sun to set and the LED lights to turn on around the rim of the Eye. It was a rainbow of colors, red to purple to blue and back to red again. Once I had taken about 30 pictures, I pulled myself away to catch up with my friends.

I was no longer looking at the big picture. I had to navigate crowds from ground level, into the undiscovered world. I was undeniably anxious about the unknown. Unknown trips and friendships in unfamiliar places. My mind was whirling. I had to focus on my only job now, to get out of the cold and onto the warm and overcrowded tube. For that day, the only adventure I needed was a trip to find cheap food and a place to rest my swollen and tired feet.

Overwhelming Anxiety and Underwhelming Sights

I pictured a warm breeze when I stepped off the train in Paris. Accordions and harps ringing through my ears, people sick with the love bug. But reality fell short. The numbing night air and the powerful wind weren't what I expected in the City of Love. We were sitting at the front of the boat, on the top deck. Not in the closed-in, protected seating, but out in the open, hit with wind gusts. I don't know who wanted to sit in the first row. My friends and I adopted "For the Experience" as our semester motto. F.T.E. We said it so much that it sounded like a fraternity name, like we belonged to some sort of secret organization.

F.T.E. was not a gang. It was our way of life for the semester. We had to do things we might never be able to do again, for the experience of it, even if it sucked. The way I saw it, we only had one semester in Europe, and if an opportunity presented itself to us, I would jump on it. In retrospect, I could have lived without freezing on the boat.

I was a tangled mess of hair and wind-burnt cheeks. My eyes were watery, mainly because of the wind, but also from emotion. Who wouldn't get emotional looking at the Eiffel Tower? We were cruising into our first night in Paris. I had taken the Eurostar with my classmates from London. One stretch of the train ride was underwater. As we passed under the English Channel, I half expected to see fish and sharks and coral reefs. Instead, the dark night surrounded the train. No light shined through the thick steel walls of the tunnel. Being underwater was actually more burdensome than enjoyable: everyone's ears popped. I could see them pinch their noses and shut their eyes tight, trying to unplug their ears.

It was the last weekend in January. Richmond University was holding weekend trips in different countries, and Paris was the first. It was my first time in France. I had dreamt of going to Paris since I was a little girl, reading about the City of Love in my middle school French class.

I was not fluent by any means. In high school, I practiced speaking and writing with my aunt's partner from Canada, Pierre, who speaks fluent French and English, as does his daughter. The summer after tenth grade, I visited her and her family in Ste. Sophie, Quebec. I took French my first semester of college, but since then, I had no practice.

In all of my previous French classes and conversations with family, I could get away with mispronunciations and stumbling on my words. The Parisians would hate me: an American nearly clueless about the French tongue and culture. I would be lucky if I knew how to ask for the bathroom and for the check at the end of dinner.

I sat next to Eliana, bundled in her black and brown leather jacket. I could tell from her shivering and chattering teeth that it wasn't blocking out the cold. Behind me sat Zach, Michaela, Claire, and Emily. We all huddled with our knees to our chests, rotating like rotisserie chickens to expose different sides to the wind. When my face got cold, I put the wind at my back. I turned and turned until I was perpetually cold. There was no hope of staying warm.

I pulled out my phone as we got closer to the Eiffel Tower. Refusing to take my gloves off, I slid my nose over the camera button. With my nose tip cold, I had no luck. I compromised and took my right glove off, snapping pictures like the paparazzi.

I was amazed. My textbooks of classes past had come alive: a perfectly symmetrical, tall structure stood before me. The night sky was a warm glow, illuminated with the Tower's golden lights. It stood out against the dim background of streets and buildings. A beacon of light shined from the top, blasting left and right and across the city, saying, "I'm here! You can't miss me!"

I had seen necklaces with Eiffel Towers on them. Books, pamphlets, posters, mini-models, purses, shirts. Nothing compared to seeing it in person, a real-3D monument, towering above me.

The boat continued down the Seine, past the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay. Museum after museum, government office after restaurant strip. "Here, on the left you'll see..." Our tour guide spoke over the intercom with a thick French accent. I could understand her, but I wasn't giving her my full attention. They were words I could listen to on an audio guide at home. My senses, on the other hand, were heightened, and something I couldn't replicate. I wasn't shocked so much by the architecture or the famous landmarks, but rather, the realization that I was in Paris. By myself. It wasn't my family or my friends sitting next to me. It was people I had known for just two weeks. I took my eyes off the landscape and turned to the people sitting around me. *I don't know if I actually like you. We have class together and it's convenient to walk to breakfast with you, but can I actually call you my friends yet, if ever? Will I be able to go to you if I'm having a bad day?* So much shock in the past weeks: sights, sounds, faces, places, excitement, disappointment.

Literature and art makes Paris so romantic. Music you can sway to, dancing in the moonlight, lovers leaning over each other at dinner, and the echoing bell of Notre Dame. I had only been in Paris for a few days, and it was not what poets and artists make it out to be. I was cold and wet and the people we had passed on the streets were the opposite of friendly and welcoming.

Then again, literature and art is drafted. Over and over. Artists work at pieces for a long time before they are ready for the public. Raw experience, on the other hand, is just that. There is no preparation or retake of a scene. Things don't always go well. You might lose your glove in the wind or, worse, your phone might die.

I tried to prepare. I tried to do research about where I would travel. I read people's personal stories and I also read information guides. Preparation was a good thing, until I

developed expectations. I wanted to have the same life changing, awe-inspiring experiences as every other person I read or saw. On that boat down the Seine, I realized it wouldn't be possible to relive someone else's reality. I had to make the semester my own.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even notice the boat turn around. We had cruised to the outskirts of the city, where the lights and the tour guide's explanations were fewer and far between. *Time to get the wind in the other direction!* Around every bend of the river, I expected the Eiffel Tower to be there. I could spend hours looking it up and down. Until I explored inside Le Louvre and other places, they were just buildings with famous names.

First the soft glow against the cloudy night. Then the pointed shape of the tower and its beacon shining light up into the sky. La Tour Eiffel finally came back into view. I stared it down, unblinking, until my eyes brimmed with wind tears. Then the light show started. It was like someone flipped a switch. Sparkling, yellow lights. Thousands of them going off, dancing in the dark night. There was no sound to go along with it, except for the "Woah's" and "Ah's" from everyone on the boat. "I had no idea it did that!" I said to Eliana, straining my voice against the wind.

Once I was back on WiFi, I researched the light spectacular. Twenty-thousand individually-installed light bulbs are used in the light show every night. It lasts for five minutes every hour on the hour from sundown to 1 a.m. (The Eiffel Tower's Illuminations). We were lucky enough to witness it on our riverboat tour.

I pulled my eyes away from the Tower. I gazed down at the back of the boat, at my newfound friends sitting around me. Where were my mom and dad? Where was my brother? Where were my friends from school? *Elaine, they're not here, and they're not coming. You left everybody back home, remember?* The thought wiped the smile from my face. It brought my

mood from ten to one. *How was I supposed to enjoy these sights and places without the people I loved?* I promised myself that I wouldn't regret being in Europe. I had made my choice, and I needed to live by it.

I could not think like this for the rest of my time abroad. I wouldn't enjoy where I was if my mind was back home. My head had to be here, in the moment in Paris. *Sometimes you have to have your own experiences. You have new people to explore them with. It's not a bad thing.* My mom's text message resounded in my head. I carried her words with me as we passed the Tower and returned to the dock.

I carried her words right through the doors of the Louvre the next morning. We stepped off our tour bus and into lines to grab tickets. Emily, Claire, Eliana, Michaela and I found each other and headed for the museum entrance.

We had sped-walked there, rain pelting down and leaving watermarks on our purses and clothes. We entered through a glass pyramid, with a staircase winding down to the main level. *Oo, how fancy.* Once inside the pyramid, the air erupted with sound. Below, thousands of people walked this way and that, in the typical museum fashion: standing in line for the bathroom, sitting against a wall and resting their feet, pointing at pamphlets at the kiosk desk, handing off their tickets to the admissions staff. I took a breath and embraced the crowd we would have to navigate.

"I'm going to split off and meet you guys at the bookstore, yeah?" Eliana asked.

"Yeah, sure, whatever. Somebody will text you," I answered. I couldn't give her my full attention when the rest of the room was buzzing with activity. On the beam behind us was a

photocopy of the Mona Lisa, and an arrow pointing up. I turned to the rest of the group. "Guys, I think we should follow the picture."

We got lost and sidetracked by religious paintings and Greek sculptures and just about everything else. Claire's history instinct kicked in, and she started rattling off information about this sculpture and that one. She was an archaeology major and her focus was on Greek and Roman history. The sculptures and artifacts fascinated her, but she knew what she wanted to see and did not waste her time with anything else. She studied each one, reading the information blurbs and captions.

Michaela and I, on the other hand, took our time studying each and every little thing. If we were going to be here once, I wanted to really understand what I was seeing. Information blurb after caption after: *We appreciate your patience while this artifact is being restored.* Notices were written in French, but I saw the English underneath and read it first, not bothering to confuse myself anymore than I already was. There was no end to the museum: if there wasn't a right turn, there was a staircase, and if there was no turn, there was a hallway that expanded into an open room of more paintings. Someone stood in front of nearly everything on display. I had to work my way towards pieces at an awkward angle, trying not to get in other people's line of view.

We reached another arrow and Mona Lisa picture. Beyond the post was a crowd, the volume level higher here than in any of the other galleries. *It's gotta be here!* Michaela and I stepped into the gallery. It hung on the far wall. I couldn't see it yet through the crowd gathered around it. The Mona Lisa was blocked off by a railing, creating a barrier on all sides. Museum employees stood on each side, monitoring the scene. I pushed my way to the front, not sure how I would handle seeing the painting up close. It was very small, about three feet by two feet. Just

as much detail as I expected, but beautiful? I wasn't so sure. So much hype around a small oil painting. Perhaps I couldn't enjoy my experience because of the hands shooting out from behind me, people taking selfies with the "lady with the mystic smile." In this environment, there was no way I could take it all in and have my peaceful time alone with the Mona Lisa.

It didn't take long before we had had enough of the crowded gallery. I attempted my selfie, but with the glare against the thick glass frame, I couldn't even tell it was the Mona Lisa. Too many people were pushing and shoving to retake it. We walked out and found our way back to the entrance level. The museum was a maze, and going against the crowd did not make it any easier. The gallery finally spit us out and into the swarm of people who just arrived at the museum. I stood in the middle of the first floor, overwhelmed by people passing me left and right, overwhelmed by the thousands of pieces of art in the museum I had yet to see.

We were in the Louvre for a little under two hours, but with the stress of finding my way around and not getting lost in the crowd, I felt like it had been a whole day. I left slightly disappointed that I didn't stay longer, but more relieved to be out in the open air. I had put pressure on myself to see this sculpture and that painting, when it would be impossible for me to see and appreciate the entire Louvre in one day. We stepped out of the museum and into the rain. Black taxis drove by with their windshield wipers at top speed, while other people traveled by foot and trudged through puddles. I didn't feel welcomed by Paris and the people in it. I really wasn't a fan of the city. Whenever I went somewhere and it was cold and rainy, I didn't get a good impression of it. With the bad weather, Paris wasn't doing itself any favors on my Must-see-before-I-die list. Whatever lay ahead on our itinerary, I wished it was not as hectic and it was more in-tune with my expectations.

“Pardonne-nous nos offenses, comme nous pardonnons aussi à ceux qui nous ont offenses...” I studied the booklet in my lap. There was no English in the mass, not in the scripture, not from a translator. Nothing. I picked up a few words here and there, but I was severely lost in translation. Next to me, Claire sat picking at her pilly scarf. Her booklet was underneath her chair. She was not even attempting to understand what was going on. Michaela flipped through the pages aimlessly, quick enough that I knew she wasn’t really listening.

When we arrived in Paris, I had this grand idea that I would go to mass at Notre Dame and it would be beautiful and one of the best experiences I would ever have. I had pictured a full house and priests who spoke with such insight and enthusiasm that I would be glued to my seat. Friendly Parisians would introduce themselves and ask me where I was from, and I would feel a part of the community and make friends to stay with my next time in Paris.

I will never know if the priests were insightful or terrible advice-givers or if they even talked about religion. I couldn’t understand them. In my Notre Dame fantasy, I was a fluent French speaker and I hung on to every word of the homily. My picture couldn’t have been more wrong. There were more open seats around me than I had predicted. The first ten rows of chairs were filled, but the entire back section was scattered. The service was sectioned off in the middle, while people talked and walked around the cathedral. I didn’t feel united under God, but separated and closed off from the rest of the congregation. I can understand why they needed a separate section: being such a well-known cathedral, there was no way anyone could close it for mass during normal visiting hours. So many people would have been turned away.

I thought I would be completely consumed by the mass. Quite the contrary, actually. I stared at the high-rise, rounded ceiling. Giving up on my poor translation skills, I spaced out completely. What was next on my list of things to do in Paris...Climb the Eiffel Tower? Eat an

entire baguette and wash it down with a glass of red wine? There was a lot to do, an overwhelming amount of must-sees. I had become way too focused on my Paris bucket list, wanting to do more than I could in a weekend visit. I moved time slots around in my head, pushing city sights right up against one another, leaving me no time to decompress or just be present.

I tried to remember the myriad of paintings I saw earlier in the Louvre, but the faces and captions blended together. Anxiety kicked in. Because I was being spoken to in a language I hardly knew. Because I did not have my mom to plan out my itinerary and prioritize what we visited. Because I assumed the only way to enjoy my time in Paris was to see as much as I could of it.

The atmosphere in the cathedral was not helping my mood. I had expected it to be bright and cheery, but it was dark and grim. The stained glass windows were not the main attraction, like other churches I had been to. It was almost as if they were hidden, only meant to be seen if you really studied the surrounding walls. I strained my neck to look up at the ceiling. Tall marble pillars surrounded the center seating area. Wide arches stretched between them, down the endless corridors of the cathedral. It was huge. From the arches hung chandeliers, painted in dark colors, capable of light but not embellished with crystal or glass like the chandeliers you see in fancy movie houses. The stained-glass windows let in little light, and new visitors brought the cold and damp air in with them. I could see everyone sitting around me, but there were no floor-to-ceiling windows like my church back home. Notre Dame was not uplifting, but stark and chilling.

Claire and Michaela did not seem as if they were in as much distress as me. They were whispering back and forth about where to go for dinner. Could they tell I was anxious? Did I have that wide-eyed, concerned look on my face? My friends and family back home knew when

I was upset. As much as I didn't like it, my anxiety was a part of me. I would have to expose my London friends to it too.

Eiffel Tower. Musée d'Orsay? Should I shower now or after dinner, since I am still wet from walking in the rain. No, maybe I'll wait in case—

"Elaine!" Michaela whisper-shouted, breaking my stream of thoughts. "Do you want to leave now or stay for the rest of the mass? I'm fine with leaving if you guys are."

"Yeah, we can leave. I'm good with that," Claire said at a normal speaking voice, not worried about the people sitting next to us.

I contemplated staying. This was probably the only time I would go to a mass at Notre Dame. A once-in-a-lifetime experience...*Screw it. I can't understand what they're saying anyways.*

"Yeah, I've heard enough. We can go."

I made the sign of the cross, and bowed at the end of the row. We quietly stood up from our chairs, dodging the congregation as they got up to receive Communion. We blended in with the mix of people going up to the pulpit and those sitting back down. Claire slipped under the red rope that separated the mass from the people walking around the cathedral. I latched the rope back into place behind me and joined the line of people leaving the cathedral.

The Starbucks was filled with the aroma of coffee and chattering people. Being a Sunday morning, I was not surprised at how many people were there.

I walked up to the barista. "Bonjour! Eh, parlez-vous anglais?"

"Bonjour. Eh, fairly well," he answered. "Go ahead."

"I'm looking for the Palace of Versailles. Do you know how to get to it from here?"

He looked at me like I just asked what two plus two was. "Yes, it's right around the corner. Go to the corner and take a right and keep walking down. It should be about five minutes down the road."

"Merci!"

I bobbed and weaved through the line of people waiting for coffee and found my friends under the awning outside. It was drizzling, as it had been all morning. Le Metro was conveniently two minutes away from our hotel. From there, we had taken the train to Versailles. We'd decided to tour Le Chateau de Versailles on our last day in France.

Michaela, Claire, and Eliana waited eagerly for my directions. "It should be right around the corner," I said. "I talked to one of the guys working and he said it should take us about five minutes to get there."

I was waiting for signs that said "Palace of Versailles," with huge red arrows pointing in the direction we needed to go. But no such luck. After a couple wrong turns and a few more stops to ask for directions, we found our way to the palace gate.

I expected a grand entrance. A gate, so ornate and bright that it was practically shouting, "Hey, I'm here, you finally found me!" But it was quite the opposite. We came upon a large, plain courtyard, and at the end stood a golden gate. Like what you would expect the Gates of Heaven to look like, except there were no white clouds or golden rays of light. What stood behind the gate was another courtyard, le Cour de Marbre, or the Marble Courtyard. And the palace. In my fantasy, it was blue skies and warm and sunny. But in reality, clouds were spitting at us, the sky was overcast, and it was cold. I was looking forward to being indoors.

My friends and I first stopped to pick up audio guides. Wherever I went and whenever they offered an audio guide, I always took it. But the guides took away from my experience.

They had in-depth facts about each room that I wasn't really interested in. I would get caught up in the guide's British jargon instead of taking in the surroundings for myself. I always talked myself into getting an audio tour anyways, because if I didn't, I'd feel like I was missing out on some life-or-death knowledge. Maybe life-or-death for a history major, but not for me.

The Palace halls were a blur. Looking back at pictures, I can remember being in rooms and staring at paintings and décor. But the opulence was overwhelming. This was my first time in a palace, and it was perhaps the most well known palace in the world. There were multiple libraries, multiple dining halls, different living quarters for different royalty, and separate halls for the staff. I'd thought a regular three-story house was impressive! This was way beyond my living standards.

Everywhere I looked had intricate detail. The ceilings, the trim around doors, bedspreads, furniture, cutlery, jewelry, statues, and so much more. Even the bathrooms were white and pristine.

The Hall of Mirrors fascinated me. A 40-foot arched ceiling with massive chandeliers hanging down from it. Hundreds of floor-to-ceiling mirrors, 357 to be exact, and 17 glass doors on the other wall (The Hall of Mirrors).

"Michaela, can you take my picture?" I asked. I waited a few seconds for people to step out of my way, with no luck. People were constantly moving through the hall. It was one of the most renowned rooms in the Palace, if not the most renowned one.

After she snapped my photo, we swapped phones and I got a picture of her. We were photo-op buddies. I could count on her to take my picture, and I hers, in famous places.

We walked through the Palace at a relatively similar pace. Still trying to listen to the audio guide, I followed its pace. Sometimes I would skip a presentation or pass by a crowd of

people and ignore what they were looking at. My brain couldn't handle all of the aesthetics. I would stare at a painting and just check out. Not by choice. My brain was just recovering.

Les Mesdames' Apartments were the last stop on our Palace tour. These were the living quarters for Louis XV's six daughters. The daughters settled in the Palace in 1752, but only his daughters Victoire and Adelaide remained there until the revolution. I was fascinated by their stories because they were the only daughters who never married; they grew old in the Palace. Different portraits hung around their rooms, showing their progression in age. Some were painted when they were young. Others showed finer lines and graying hair. Madame Victoire and Madame Adelaide each had an Interior Chamber, a Bedchamber, and a Large Chamber, and a handful of other rooms. Couches and desks and bed overhangs still stood intact, although many of the materials were restored over the years. I would've been blessed with one of those chambers. To think they had so many rooms! I wouldn't know what to do with myself!

Elaine, imagine what it would feel like to lay on their silk sheets, or to talk about our next royal duty while eating scones in the lounge chair of one of my many chambers. My attention drifted outside, where the gardens were waiting for me. When the audio guide stopped playing, we left and regrouped in the courtyard. The air was still damp and gray, but the rain had stopped. We didn't know where we were headed, so we just started walking. There are 11 main fountains on the Palace grounds, all related to Roman and Greek mythology. Some of the fountains were round pools of water and others were hexagons or rectangles. None of them were running. They were just stagnant pools of mucky, green water. I could see that the gold statues and figures in the middle had a lot of detail and thought put into them, but they could have used a good polishing and cleaning. I was surprised the gardens were not in perfect condition, but the winter does draw less people.

We made our way to the largest fountain, and the last, before the Canal. Swans and ducks swam by looking for food. This was the Apollo fountain, or Le Bassin d'Apollon. In the Palace guide's description, Apollo is being pulled in a chariot by four horses and three men blowing horns. An artist named Tuby built it between 1668 and 1670. With the fog and the vast size of the fountain, it was hard to see Apollo and his horsemen.

I stood staring at the fountain and the Canal behind it. I couldn't decide what to look at, the Palace and gardens behind me, or the grounds beyond Apollo. Claire walked over to me, bending down to pet the ducks quacking at our feet.

"Are you having fun?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," she answered. "It's really cool. I loved the Palace. I just wish it wasn't so crappy out."

"Yeah, same. The palace was huge! I was kind of overwhelmed by it. I'm trying to go to all these places but there's so much to take in that I don't really enjoy it."

"Oh no, I get what you're saying. I was trying to snapchat one of my friends from Charleston..."

"That's right, I forget you go to school there."

"Yeah. I was trying to snap her in the Hall of Mirrors. She's always wanted to go to France. I wish she was here too. I really miss my friends from home."

"Same! I feel like I'm missing out on things back home. Like I don't want to go back and it be super awkward and everybody's moved on from being my friend."

"Mm-hmm."

Finally, someone was agreeing with me, seeing things the way I was. I felt slightly more at ease, but still enveloped in my emotions.

I continued. "And I'm trying so hard to focus on where I am and living in the moment, but it's really hard. Like I don't usually get homesick, but I don't know what it is. I don't know if it's knowing that I'm so far away from home and that I have so many months ahead of me where I'm not going to see anyone. I don't know, it's kind of sucky right now."

"Oh, dude, I totally feel you. I have major FOMO. Like I know I'd be having a good time with my roommates back home, but I know their semester isn't going to match up with ours. Ours is going to be a lot better, no doubt. Just because we get to go to all these places. I mean, we're living in London! I gotta check my privilege, dude."

The weather definitely wasn't clearing up, but I already felt less weighed down by my own anxieties. "Claire, I'm glad you feel like this too. I've been super anxious about being alone and not knowing anyone in the program or what I'm doing with my life and what I'm missing out on back home."

Claire shook her head. She was a friendly face, freckled cheeks, green eyes. Reddish, long, wavy hair. And from California! I'd wanted to make friends from the Golden State ever since my family moved from San Francisco when I was four.

"Nah, I wouldn't worry, dude. I think we're all in the same boat." She paused. "But hey, Elaine, have you seen Michaela? I think she got lost looking for Marie Antoinette."

Duffy the Tour Slayer

He wore a red kilt. Lines of yellow, white and black ran through it, creating plaid squares. The colors matched his argyle socks. Atop his head sat a Scottish bearskin hat: the tall, black and furry mass you see on a British guard's head. I shivered as we walked by him. I was bundled up in my North Face, scarf and gloves, and he was in a skirt and hosiery. I hoped he was used to the cold.

It was my first night in Scotland. I had joined the school's weekend excursion to the Land of the Scots. We had left Thursday afternoon and planned to stay until Sunday.

Emily's eyes were glued to her phone. I always relied on her for directions; my data plan was pretty limiting.

"We're on George IV Bridge, right?" Emily asked the group.

"Er, I don't see a sign." I answered. "Oh wait, there it is! It's called 'The Elephant House?'"

We were on the hunt for the café where Harry Potter first came into being. I walked up to the door, scanning the windows for pictures of J.K. Rowling. Nothing.

I walk inside. The waitress stood at the front desk. "Hellooo. How many?" she asked.

"Hi! I've actually got a question," I said to her. "Is this the place where J.K. Rowling wrote Harry Potter?"

She smirked. It was a question I'm sure she got everyday. "Yeah, we have pictures on the wall if you want to see. Are you all eating here?"

"Um, we're not sure yet. We just wanted to look around. Do you know what table she sat at?"

“Yeah. I’ll show you. Follow me.” She led us to the back of the café. Between pictures of elephants and other pieces of art were pictures of Rowling, posing with one of her books. The waitress pointed to an empty table. “This is where she sat,” she said. Families and couples ate at the surrounding tables, halting their conversations to stare at us. I suddenly felt very touristy. None of my friends had followed me to the back; they either were not interested or didn’t want to interrupt other people’s meals. If this were any normal day, I would have done the same. But you don’t go to Scotland every day. So I pestered the waitress and the people eating, all for the experience.

I’m not the biggest Harry Potter fan. I’ve seen all of the movies, but I’ve only read half of the books. It’s on my bucket list to finish reading the series. But now that the hype around the books is fading, I’m in no rush to read them.

What drew me to The Elephant House was the story behind Harry Potter. J.K. Rowling was a single, depressed mother who had just moved to Edinburgh when she started writing. She sat for hours on end at the coffee shop, overlooking Edinburgh Castle. I wanted to see where the magic happened. To see the writing space of such a successful novelist. As a woman struggling to get by, she showed me that you can dream up a story no matter what your circumstances. You don’t need to have riches to write. You just need something to write with and something to write on.

Rowling is an inspiration to writers, including myself. I’ve always thought that people need to have big, life-changing experiences in order to write a book. Something individual, that people can’t relate to, but that they can aspire to do after reading. I was totally wrong. Rowling had little to live off of, but she had a thriving imagination and hope. She invented a world, based off of where she lived, that everyone could relate to: whether it was through characters,

relationships, or being a student or teacher. I learned from Rowling that no, I didn't have to see every wonder of the world or have a near-death experience in order for my writing to be novel-worthy. My everyday experience is my own, and my imagination is my own, to share with the rest of the world.

I've known writers often work in cafés, like Rowling. I just can't concentrate in them. People having conversations over coffee, waitresses coming in and out of the room... I need complete silence when I write. Or some nice, meditative music without words. I don't have a favorite writing place. I write wherever quiet is available.

The Elephant House was not quiet. It was bustling with tourists and regulars, sitting around tables and chatting the night away. The café had pastries and hot drinks, but nothing with real sustenance. We hadn't eaten since the train station back in London. There was no need to ask who was hungry; we were all starving.

Fortunately, there was a fish and chips restaurant across the street. I apologized for interrupting people's meals, thanked the waitress, and met my friends outside to pick a place to eat. Uncle's Fish and Chips Café was the most convenient. When we stepped inside, I saw massive pieces of fish. They stretched over the sides of people's plates, and the smell spread throughout the restaurant. I told myself I would only eat half, that I wouldn't force it down just because it was in front of me. Twenty minutes and too many forkfuls later, I had nothing left on my plate.

"Guys, somebody's going to have to roll me out of here," I said. "Or just come back to pick me up tomorrow. The rock in my stomach'll be gone."

Emily and I left dinner early for a ghost tour. It was free, so I knew not to expect too much. The tour guide walked us around the town, where legends of unfortunate deaths were said

to still haunt people. It really wasn't scary, and I wasn't fazed by it. It was more of a bonding experience for us. We vented about common friends on the trip that weren't getting along, and in turn, we were stressed about it and had to deal with their bitterness. We found commonality in our annoyances. And in our spirit for adventure. Everyone else was planning on going back to the hostel to sleep or get drunk at a pub on the corner. We were exploring the city at 9pm. We talked about all of the things we wanted to do in Scotland and where else we wanted to travel in Europe. I realized we had a lot in common. Reserved, reflective by nature, but at heart, adventurous and open to experience.

The next morning, we had our bags packed and loaded into the tour van by 9:15. The other people coming in and out of the hostel were around our age. Downstairs, the game room and dining area conjoined, making it a place to hangout and eat. We each got a meal ticket for a complimentary breakfast. I found peanut butter, bananas, and eggs. PB&B was my go-to; it was the best fruit and nut combination out there.

I was the last one to load my stuff up on the bus. I had wrongly assumed everyone would come back down after loading up their bags. After sitting and watching new groups come down to eat, I went upstairs to the lobby. The same secretary that haunted me yesterday was sitting there. She had thick, black dreads that stretched to her shoulders. Her nose was pierced with a septum, the kind that you see on bulls. The night before, we had talked about where to eat and what to do in Edinburgh. She was pleasant enough; she just had more spunk than I was used to.

Tracy, our group leader, stood there waiting for me. She was the admissions counselor that set up the trip. "I'm sorry, I thought we were all meeting back downstairs!" I said.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” she replied. “Let’s just load up your stuff and get going. I think everybody is already on the bus.”

When we stepped outside, a man in a kilt greeted me. *I’ve got to get used to this.*

“Aye, I’m Duffy,” he said with an outstretched hand. “Pleasure to meet youuu. I’m yer tour guide.”

He wore a royal blue quarter-zip with a white cross that stretched from his right shoulder to his left hip. It was the Scottish flag. His kilt was the same blue, with plaid squares of red and black. A small, beige bag with fringes hung from his waist belt. *Is that a purse?* I found out that the proper term is a *sporrán*. He wore a dark gray ball cap. His blonde buzz cut extended from below his hat. Duffy’s face was round. He had a strong build and enthusiasm to last a lifetime, almost exactly what I pictured a Scottish man to look like.

Our first stop was the Scottish Kelpies in Falkirk. We were about an hour west of Edinburgh. I was happy to stretch my legs and use the bathroom before my bladder exploded. Much to my dismay, we had arrived too early for the gift shop or bathrooms to open. Peeing would have to wait. We stepped off the bus, through the salt-covered, wet roads and towards the monument.

Two horse heads towered above us, reaching a height of about thirty meters. On the left, the horse’s head was bent down to the ground in front of it. On the right, the horse was looking up to the sky. Their faces were stern and determined, like they were standing their ground, saying, “You can look at me all you want, but don’t mess with me.” The Kelpies weighed 300 tons each, with almost 1000 stainless steel skin-plates (Constructing the Kelpies).

I was awe-struck. We stood in Helix Park, right off of the highway exit. We were in the middle of nowhere, and here was the largest equine sculpture in the world! It was so modern and

so intricate. It looked like it came straight out of an art gallery-- if there was one big enough to fit it.

The Kelpies come from Scottish legend. They are said to be shape changing aquatic legends. This particular sculpture was finished in late 2013. It is an ode to Scotland's industrial heritage, which was strongly influenced by horsepower.

Emily and I took turns posing in front of the tall horseheads. They were built in a small pool that streamed into a pond. I walked around each monument, seeing it from all angles. The rest of the group stood behind, gazing from a distance. I had no problem getting up close and personal with the horses, and neither did Emily.

Scotland is divided by the Highlands and the Lowlands, a division in culture and geography. Gaels used to inhabit the Highlands and speak Gaelic, while the Scots lived in the Lowlands and spoke Scottish. Today, there is a blend of cultures. The Highlands are known for crazy weather, where one minute you are in the middle of a hailstorm, and the next there isn't a cloud in the sky. Our destination for the day was our hostel at Loch Ness, over 150 miles north of Edinburgh. We had been in the van for a few hours since our stop at the Kelpies. Duffy had been talking for the majority of the ride, explaining facts about this Loch and that, the history of certain castles, our agenda, and more that I couldn't remember. I listened to him, but my eyes were drawn outside, as I leaned over the guy sitting next to me, trying to get a better view.

Duffy had made a playlist of traditional Scottish music. I only knew a few of the songs, but I'm always eager to add new music to my iPod. All of a sudden, I was hearing the closing scene of *The Breakfast Club*. Simple Minds, who sang "Don't You," was a Scottish band. If it weren't for Duffy, I would have never known! Heads were bobbing up and down. The guys tried

to hit the high notes, and then Duffy came over the speaker and started singing. We all lost it. It was a good way to break the ice, even though we'd already been crammed together in a van the whole morning.

The head bobbing stopped when "Amazing Grace" came on. Everyone stopped talking and stared thoughtfully out the window. All we could hear were the bagpipes. Memories of church flooded back to me, sitting in a pew next to my mom during a spring mass dedicated to recognizing the loved ones we lost. It was my mom's favorite song, and I really liked it too. Thinking of her made me sad, knowing she would have loved to see Scotland. *She would love it here*, I thought. But I was too excited about the surroundings to let sadness plague my experience. My mom would have to live vicariously through me, and I was okay with that.

Duffy came over the speaker. "Anybody seen *Braveheart*?" The song *Revenge* came on over the speakers. I felt like I was in a movie, driving up and down the rolling hills with a huge body of water next to me, the sunlight peaking through the trees. At our speed, the flashes of sun were as quick as strobe lights. The Loch stretched on as we rounded bends in the road, revealing more snow-capped mountains and blue waters. The music moved me, and I forgot about my schoolwork and how far away I was from home. I was totally and completely in the moment.

We finally arrived at Loch Ness. Duffy stopped so we could take pictures with the "Welcome" sign. I posed like I was scared out of my mind, like Nessie was about to jump out of the water and drag me down with her. It was an eerie place, Loch Ness. The air was damp and the sky grey, fog hovering above the water and encircling us. If Nessie were to get us, the visibility would be so poor that no one could find and save us.

There was no sight of Nessie. I was more concerned about getting to the hostel. Earlier that day, after the Kelpies, Duffy had taken our orders for dinner so it would be ready for us when we arrived. The options were a vegetarian rice dish, pasta, or haggis. Haggis is a traditional Scottish dish made from sheep pluck. Duffy went into full detail about what the “pluck” was. “Lungs, heart, liver-- anything you usually throw away. And once seasoning is put on it and it’s mixed with suet and oatmeal, it’s stitched inside a sheep stomach!” He had way too much enthusiasm to be talking about organs.

I’ve watched my dad take apart a whole chicken from the store and grill it. He always takes out the lungs, heart and liver. I didn’t have a desire to eat them then, and I didn’t now. But eating haggis was part of the Scottish experience, and I couldn’t say no. What was the point of living if not for the experience?

We were staying at a place called “Morag’s Lodge.” It was a backpacker hostel for people on a budget. I was happy when I found out it had a lounge area, free WiFi, and its own built-in bar. When I got downstairs to the dining hall, other travelers were already sitting and eating. There was chicken, salad, pasta, but I didn’t see any haggis. When I got my plate, I learned that the haggis was stuffed inside the chicken. That made it a little easier to look at. For my first bite, I was feeling surprisingly adventurous. *Smell, chew, swallow. Don’t think about it, E.* The taste wasn’t overwhelmingly horrible like I anticipated. In fact, there really was not much flavor to it. Perhaps because it was disguised by the chicken. The texture was grainy like oats, but it looked more like a meat stuffing. I could get past the sight and the taste, but knowing the ingredients made my stomach turn.

“Now, let me tell you a wee story.

“There were two clans that took over the Isle of Skye, the MacLeod’s and MacDonald’s. They didn’t get along because they were always rivals for power. But one day Mary MacLeod comes along and meets Donald Gorm Mor MacDonald. And they fall in love, and everybody thought their marriage could bring peace between the two clans. For one year, they were married unofficially, as a wee trial run. Right before the wedding, Mary was hanging out with her best friend Robert. They were on their way to the ceremony and Mary fell off her horse, bloodyin’ and bruisin’ her face. When she walked into the ceremony looking the way she did, Donald immediately took defense and punched Robert square in the jaw. Then the MacLeod’s attacked the MacDonald’s and it became a wee bloody fight. Mary and Robert fled the scene and escaped on horse to the faery pools, to the River of Eternal Life.

Mary and Robert both had injuries and were frightened for their lives. When they reached the faery pools, they asked the faeries to restore their health. Mary and Robert dipped their faces in the running water. They came back up and all of the scratches and dirt on their faces were gone. They had no more wrinkles or age spots. Seeing the change in their faces, they jumped into the faery pools with all of their clothes on. When they came back up, their cuts and wounds were healed. They felt like life had been brought back to them. And they decided to live out their youth together, away from all of their family drama and their past. And so they rode off into the sunset and lived a wee happy life together.”

Duffy paused. He waited for us to react. I was half listening and half sleeping.

“So guess where I’m taking you? We’re going to the faery pools!”

I was a little skeptical at first. It was winter and there was no way I was jumping in the water. Then again...what if it was like the Fountain of Youth? What if I were to come out of the water a brand new person? And the faeries! I could wish my...

“I try to bring all of my tours here,” Duffy said. “It’s a tradition. I’m going to dip my face in the water, and you all should do the same. If you have water bottles, you can fill ‘em up. It’s safe to drink. And it’s probably going to be the best water you all’ve ever tasted.”

We passed a group of cows and Duffy stopped. “Aye, finally time for you to take some pictures of the hairy coos!”

We stopped at a wide stretch in the road and filed off the bus. The air was cold and the wind made me wish I were still sitting on the bus. Blue skies emerged from behind the clouds, and white-capped mountains stood in the distance. Emily bought a stuffed animal hairy coo the day before, and now she was obsessed with the real ones. When we got to their pen, they were walking around the edge, teasing us when we tried to get close enough to pet them. They were big, about the size of an average American cow. These Highland Cattle had long brown fur and a black face. The hair on the top of their heads was longer and covered their eyes. Their horns were gray and white, pointy and curved. I tried to get a decent picture with them, but the fence was in my way and there were so many mud puddles that I couldn’t get close. I didn’t have much time for the perfect photo anyways. Duffy was ready for the faery pools.

Once we had seen and smelled enough of the hairy coos, Duffy led us down the riverbank. We crossed over a bridge with a strong current running under it. The faery pool wasn’t a still body of water like I had pictured. According to Duffy, it was River Sligachun. It was churning, splashing up against the rocks. Duffy led us down the slope and to the water. Only one person could dip their faces at a time; the water was too strong and there was only enough space for one person to stand without getting wet. When Duffy reached the water, he bent down and got into a push-up position so that his clothes wouldn’t get soaked. He put his head at the edge of the rocks, right above the stream. Duffy lowered himself and dunked his entire head.

“Wooo! How do I look? I’m much more pretty now, aren’t I? And my hair’s all grown back?”

We laughed. “Oh yeah Duff, you look great. You don’t look a day over twenty.”

People started lining up behind him. Duffy stepped back and headed back towards the bus. “Oh yeah, and don’t yous forget your wish! Or else you’ll have to go back and do it again!”

I wasn’t in a hurry to get down on my hands and knees and get my face wet. But it was cold outside, and the sooner I went, the sooner I could get back on the bus. I was the seventh one to go. I edged my way to the rocks, making sure not to step in any puddles or misplace my feet and fall in the river. When I was close enough to the water, I bent down in a plank and bent my face forward. *Deep breath. Hold it.*

The water felt like ice. The cold hit me fast and woke me up. I held myself there for five seconds, and then I got up and wiped my face with my hands, careful not to smudge my mascara. I got out of the way for the next person. As soon as I stood up, I realized I hadn’t made my wish. I didn’t know what to wish for, and I totally forgot everything when my face hit the water.

So I went back after Emily dunked her face. And again I forgot. Again, I went back to fill up my water bottle and hunkered down. I paused, bracing myself for the cold. “Third time’s a charm,” I whispered.

I came back up, wish made, not yet granted, and feeling refreshed. Emily and I took pictures for evidence of our wet faces. I had her take a picture of me drinking my faery water. It was the best water I had ever tasted. Not that water really has a taste. It was just so fresh and clean and cold. Despite my best efforts, mascara streaked down my cheeks, and the hairs surrounding my face were wet. I didn’t have anything to dry off with and I had a wet spot on my

jacket from where I was still dripping. But having dipped my face in a faery pool, I felt like I had had a genuine Scottish experience.

It wasn't the last faery pool we were going to see. That afternoon, after riding around for a few more hours through the Highlands, Duffy stopped the bus at a mountain trail. The trail led us to Black Cuillins, the largest mountain on the Isle of Skye. Tracy had said we would be doing some hiking. I was expecting to do more by this point. Duffy told us we had about an hour to walk, and then we had to drive back for dinner at 6:30. It was about a two-mile path. My goal was to make it to the bottom of the mountain and take pictures from there.

The trail was muddy and rocky. Not an incline, pretty flat, but it had its dips and hills. Faery pools, ones that actually looked like pools, were about halfway down the path. The water was a greenish blue, with rocks rising high around it, like a small-scale version of a quarry. There was still no sight of any faeries.

About forty minutes into our walk, Tracy caught up with us and said we should start heading back. I got one more picture of the faery pool I was standing above, and turned around. *Guess I won't make it to the mountain.*

We had hardly started retracing our steps when the storm hit. I thought it was rain at first. Hearing it hit the ground louder than normal raindrops do, I looked down at my fleece and saw that it was not rain hitting me, but hail. It started out easy and light, and then suddenly, we were being pelted. Some pieces were about the size of a pea; others were smaller, but still solid and painful. The pellets felt like a paint gun with endless ammo. The flock of sheep on the hill huddled together, but there was nowhere for them to go. They just stood there and faced the hail. They did have fur to soften the blow, but it still had to hurt.

We started running back to the bus, but the hail got heavier and it hurt to run against it. I put my gloves on and pulled my scarf up to my chin. My hat was down to my nose. I couldn't see anything. The hail stung my legs and hands so badly that I gave up walking altogether. When Emily realized I stopped, she grabbed my hand and started pulling me along.

"Are you okay?" she shouted.

"No!" I yelled back. "This hurts so bad! I can't move and I can't see!"

Her hands were raw and red. I would've given her my gloves, but I was too selfish to take them off. She turned around and started walking backwards, shielding me from the hail as much as she could. We eventually caught up to the other girls in our group, shouting back at each other about the hailstorm that came out of nowhere. We decided to form a huddle and put our backs to the outside of the circle. I felt like I was in *March of the Penguins*. I had no idea how long the hailstorm would last. We slowly inched our way forward, but not enough progress to just sprint back to the bus.

As the hail lessened, we broke off our huddle and started walking again. Emily kept shielding me, until the sky wasn't as thick and we could see again. We were in too much pain to walk, and our soaked clothes slowed us down. Picking up our walking pace, we carried on up the path. The bus finally came back into view, and then we made a run for it.

I didn't expect our quality fresh air to turn into a hailstorm. But that was the weather in the Highlands: unpredictable, but usually pretty stormy. We didn't die like I felt I was going to. We survived. Soaking wet and with a story to tell. I still had a long semester ahead of me, a very unpredictable one of late night assignments and travels to unknown places. I felt defeated by the storm, but I also had a little more hope that I could take on what the world threw at me. If I could survive a hailstorm, I was more confident I could survive whatever came next.

Getting Settled in the Homestead

I was really hoping that the light would be red by the time we got to the crosswalk. My calves were burning from sprinting. Cait, Zach and I were finishing our run through Hyde Park. I had suggested we change up our routine and do a speed workout instead of a long run. Honestly, who wants to intentionally sweat off their ass?

Oh wait, that's me. And as out-of-breath and warm as I was, I wasn't going to stop until we got to Atlantic House. There were black taxis and double-decker buses driving towards us from a few blocks away. Bicyclists squeezed between cars and the sidewalk. Still plenty of time to cross.

"COMMITTED!" I yelled. Cait and Zach followed my lead as we sprinted across the road. I was so focused on getting to the sidewalk that I almost stepped in a pile of dog poop. And I almost tripped Zach. "Oo, my bad."

We ran down the sidewalk until we reached St. Alban's Grove, the address for the Kensington's campus' main building, Atlantic House. I finally put the brakes on. 9:48 a.m. Twelve minutes to spare before the dining hall closed. Just enough time to stretch out and get the last batch of eggs and sausage.

Our friends were already down there waiting for us. They sat around one of the long tables. We practically owned it after sitting there for all of our meals. I grabbed a tray and got behind Cait and Zach.

I wasn't a fan of the dining policy. When you walk in, you grab a blue tray. On the counter next to it is cereal and tea. Then down the line is the coffee, the juices, the bagels, and the toaster. Peanut butter and Nutella did exist in London, even though my tour guide thought they were fake spreads. The good stuff came next. Kidney beans in red sauce, which I wouldn't

dare touch for breakfast. Halves of tomatoes. Fried eggs. Sausage links. And around the corner were fruit, cheese, cold cuts, yogurt, and granola. The Sodexo worker stood behind the cash register to scan our IDs. And once that ran through, we weren't allowed to get back in line. So I had to pile everything and anything I thought about eating. I often smuggled cereal in a coffee cup or an apple for snacks later.

"Well, if it isn't the smelly crew!" Michaela said as we sat down. "There's an open table over there for you to stink up."

"HEY!" Cait said back. "Homie, in a couple months we won't get to do this anymore. Take in all my sweat while you can."

We talked about the night before and what we had in store for the day. I prepped my breakfast sandwich as everybody settled into the conversation.

"And here today we have Chef Elaine on the premises," Zach said, holding up a spoon for a microphone. "And here's her one-of-a-kind breakfast sandwich! We have a fried egg and chopped tomato on a lightly toasted plain bagel. Oh, and she's even got her fix of protein with her turkey and cheese. Any comments Elaine?"

"Yeah. Leave me alone. You don't want to mess with hungry Elaine."

He backed off right away. "And there we have it, folks! Thanks for tuning in to Cooking with Elaine."

Everybody watched in anticipation. As I picked it up, the tomato and a piece of egg fell out the back of the sandwich. Too good to be true.

"Well, my heap of a sandwich will have to hold me over until dinner. Since they STARVE us and don't give us a lunch plan!"

I was sure I had plenty of time to get to class. But here I was, shutting the door to my flat at 1:17 pm and class started at 1:30 pm. The walk from my room at Courtfield Gardens took about ten minutes, but to Young Hall it was another five. I was going to make it, even if the teacher already did roll call. Marcus Slease wanted us to call him by his first name, which I found extremely strange, seeing how he was a professor. He never wore a suit and tie. Business casual: jeans or khakis and a flannel. Or just plaid as the weather got warmer.

I was sweating by the time I walked into the classroom. Marcus was done with attendance, and he was now opening up the class discussion. I chose to sit in the front row the first day, eager to be in a class called "Travel Writing." Students behind me were staring me down, I'm sure, as I squeezed past people's backpacks and coats and slid into my chair. Cait sat next to me, leaning over as I got settled.

"Hey. I didn't think you were gonna make it," she whispered. "I thought you were skipping."

"Yeah, no, I wouldn't do that," I whispered back. "Our paper is due soon and I don't want to miss anything."

Marcus was finishing our lesson on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. He introduced us to the discussion questions, and then we set off to talk about the reading with our partners, and then regroup as a whole class. This was the typical way class went. And typically, Cait didn't do the reading, so I spent half of our partner time explaining it. Fortunately, she was caught up today.

"Question One," I said. "Discuss Kerouac's writing style. How does it compare to other writers we've read. Do you think it's effective?"

I had heard of Kerouac before, but I had never had the chance to read him. Funny how I was in a foreign country and we were talking about American writers. Then again, it was a

course catered towards study abroad students. I was overwhelmed the first day of class, seeing 40 new faces from 40 different places. Over the semester, I learned that over half of the class was American students. Others were from other parts in England, or Ireland or France, just to name a few. Kensington was the campus for upperclassmen, and Richmond Hill was where the freshies belonged. I was glad I signed up for upper level classes, guaranteeing my place in the heart of London.

Seventeen Young Street was off of High Street Kensington, or “High Street Kens” as the locals called it. T.K. Maxx, Banana Republic, Whole Foods, Nando’s, Marks & Spencer. Restaurants and stores lined the street. One of my classmates told me they saw Matt LeBlanc walking down High Street Kens. Robert Downey Jr. posted a video on Instagram when he was driving down High Street. It’s a well-known street, and I was really hoping to run into someone famous. But no such luck.

Travel Writing ended early, and I had enough time to grab a smoothie before my next class. I passed Banana Republic, knowing that no matter what country I was in, Banana was still a little too pricey for my liking. Vanessa worked at Banana Republic back home. I guess that’s where she got her nickname, “Banaña.” Mine was “The Finisher.” If we were drinking in Cait and Claire’s room before we went out, I was the one to finish up a bottle of Svedka or Malibu. Fortunately, it was usually only a swallow or two. I had a problem letting things go to waste if they were paid for.

“Hydrate, don’t diedrate!” Vanessa would remind us before we all went out. I’m sure she would tell us that again before our regular Wednesday night routine. On Wednesdays, we went to Imperial College. Imperial is a business and engineering school in London. It was a ten-minute walk from Atlantic, and lucky us, as study abroad students, we had free access to the

school's clubs and their on-campus bar. We made friends with a few of the other Wednesday night regulars there. Sad to think I might never see the locals again.

I was headed for *Boost*, the smoothie station at the High Street Kens tube stop. The drinks were expensive, and I rarely treated myself to one. When I had left for Scotland, we stopped there before we got on the train, and thank God, they had free samples. I was hooked ever since. Jamba Juice or Panera didn't even compare. They were just so cold and they had real fruit and veggies. Whatever your heart desired, they had it. Smoothies were my thing, especially before a big trip. Whenever I was waiting at the airport for a flight, I'd get a smoothie. Whenever I went out to breakfast, I'd get a smoothie. Some people like milkshakes or bagels or breakfast sandwiches. The health nut in me craved smoothies every time.

I had been trying to get Vanessa to come to *Boost* with me for the longest time. She was a big smoothie person too. And it was more convenient for her, seeing how her dorm was in Atlantic. But our schedules never lined up. She had class when I was free, and I was in my room doing homework whenever she was free. Vanessa was my first friend in the program. She left from Logan Airport, the same flight and everything as me. And back in the States, she lived closest to me too. From Wethersfield, Connecticut, I could make the hour and a half drive to see her. We already planned to reminisce about our London adventures once the semester was over.

Vanessa was a sweetheart. Very genuine, very understanding of the emotional roller coaster that study abroad was. She was a trooper, always rallying to go out after a long day of classes or explore the city. Always concerned about everyone's happiness and well-being, that when we were planning to go out, she would be the one to get us the most intoxicated. No Homie Left Behind. That was another one of her nicknames, the Instigator.

We called ourselves “the Fam.” Michaela, Zach, Emily, Cait, Claire, Vanessa, and I. And we loved creating fan fictions about each other. We were a family because we were all so close. We also created roles for ourselves based on our personalities and functions in our group. And the fan fic went like this:

Emily and I had met in college. We got married and started a family together. She was the dad, and I was the mom. Vanessa was our youngest child. She was the annoying shit little brother. Zach was Emily’s brother, and we called him the Creepy Uncle. He really wasn’t creepy, but we had to give him some personality to make him stand out. Cait was my adopted daughter, because Michaela, who we called crazy Auntie Kay, couldn’t support Cait. Auntie Kay was a drug addict that Emily and I had met in college. As her best friends, Auntie Kay left us to raise Cait. And Claire was our middle child, the one we forgot about sometimes because she was in her own world. We were one big happy family. Most of the time, we were dysfunctional, and sometimes we got on each other’s nerves. But at the end of the day, we were all there for each other.

Even at clubs, we all stuck together. Except Cait. She wanted to make friends with every person there. The rest of us danced awkwardly in a circle until the liquor or music hit our systems and we just stopped caring about what we looked like. Vanessa never failed to document our nights out on Snapchat. But it was a good thing she took all those videos and gross photos, because I wouldn’t remember a lot of our experiences in London otherwise. And as much as Vanessa looked out for other people, she was a little ditsy: in need of direction. That’s where my mom jeans came into play.

I loved Vanessa and all of my study abroad friends. We got along, could trust each other, and helped each other with school projects. Michaela and Cait were often the superstars in my projects for Video Production class. We were all adventurous and willing to make the most of

every minute. That is, of course, when we weren't doing homework. If we weren't studying together or hanging out, I felt like a part of me was missing. I felt lonelier than normal, probably because I didn't have any other friends or family for thousands of miles.

Then again, I needed my space sometimes. I loved walking around the city by myself. *Sorry Mom*. Exploring new streets or parks. My parents told me to always be alert, looking out for cars that don't see you crossing the street, or suspicious people nearby. I used to look at people who listened to headphones while they walked and think they were idiots. Then I tried it. I tried blocking out the world around me, loud enough so that my own worries wouldn't bother me. I would just focus on the music. If it was an early morning walk to class, like my Friday Video Production class, I needed my iPod to give me some high spirits and hope that the day was going to be a good one.

Some days, it was easier than others to be positive. For the first two months in London, I often woke up with a knot in my stomach and a dark cloud over my head. And my day hadn't even started yet. I just couldn't stop being anxious; the city was suffocating me. I had never realized how much of a nature person I was, until I didn't have it surrounding me anymore. Back at Assumption, I was on a campus with plenty of green space: trees on the walk to class, well-kept grounds, and a river running through the wooded areas. At home, I lived at the end of a road, with a car passing by every few hours and older neighbors that kept to themselves. I practically grew up in the woods, with a front and back yard and silence to put me to sleep.

I wasn't used to being around so many people. There was so much noise and so much constantly going on that I had to pick and choose what to do. And nobody was giving me direction. I knew where my classes were, what I had for homework, and when the dining hall open and closed. The rest was up to me. I could spend the semester however I wanted. I had

never had so much freedom, never had to make so many day-to-day decisions for myself.

Daunting couldn't even describe what I felt.

And I had never been so homesick before in my life. It sucked not having a constant tie to social media and to my phone. WiFi was spotty in England. The times I counted on it most were when I Skyped my family and friends. For most Skype sessions, my screen froze or I lost the connection at least five times. All I wanted to do was see a familiar face and hear voices I knew. My friends here were like family, but they couldn't replace my blood relatives or my already-existing and lifelong friends. My Courtfield roommate lived upstairs and wasn't exactly a comforting person. She did her own thing, and really didn't care to know what was going on with me.

Almost every time I hung up on Skype, I started crying. Or I sat on my bed and wanted to cry. But day after day, I collected myself. And it got easier. I would head out before I could let homesickness creep into my head anymore. If I stayed busy, I wouldn't think about home-- or at least not as much.

I plugged in my headphones as I passed the stores on High Street Kens. I chose "Meant to Live" by Switchfoot. Not rap, not heavy metal, but rock with some meaningful lyrics. *Fumbling his confidence / And wondering why the world has passed him by.../ Maybe we've been livin' with our eyes half open / Maybe we're bent and broken, broken...* I wasn't going to let the world pass me by, or live with my eyes half open. I was going to live with purpose, and not let it slip out of my fingers.

Pulsing to the music, I suddenly felt untouchable. I was in my own little world. I walked with confidence in my stride, for once not overwhelmed by the crowd. But feeling lost in the crowd in a good way, able to go unnoticed and be content with that.

The people on High Street Kens were always in a rush. Lots of foot traffic, lots of road traffic. And nobody walked on one side of the sidewalk. They walked wherever there was room. I had to bob and weave more times than I could remember. Most people were dressed professionally: men in suits, women in tights and dresses or skirts, long jackets, all on lunch break or running between meetings. Homeless men and women sat outside store doors. One man was sitting on a blanket, carving a dog out of some sort of clay sand. The kind you see that's advertised as *No Mess* for kids to play with at the mall. The dog wore a sad, frowning face, and I looked away every time I passed it, wishing I had the funds to help the man. But I was going to spend my money on a smoothie.

The tube stop was the average afternoon rush. This stop was more than the average spot to catch the train: there were eateries upstairs to grab and go before heading out of the city. People were lined up at Ben's Cookies, Nero Express, Boots Pharmacy and Beauty. Lucky for me, there was only one person waiting for a smoothie, and she was finishing up her order.

I was tempted to skip my next class. I could've kept walking down High Street Kens and saw what the rest of the Fam was up to. But Photojournalism was once a week, and I knew the professor would be thrown off if one of us weren't there. There were only five students in the class, and it was all girls. The first few weeks, I actually felt like a minority. Not in the sense of race, but ethnicity and culture. Three of my classmates had been to London before, and this wasn't their first class at Richmond. The professor was from Paris, one student was from Portugal, and another was from Sweden. There were three of us from the States.

My Shakespeare class was also once a week: Monday nights for three hours. Sometimes we took class trips to see plays in local theatres. Other times, we discussed the plays we read for the week: *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*. There was no way we would finish them all by the end of the semester. *Less Shakespearean language that I'll have to struggle to understand!* My professor was British, which made it an even more authentic experience: reading Shakespeare in England! Regardless of my love for accents, it was an adjustment to get used to the longer class periods. I often caught myself more focused on how my professor pronounced words than what he was actually saying.

I got to see parts of the city when I went with my class for Shakespeare plays. Other times, I was out on my own agenda or for my Photojournalism class. At the beginning of the semester, my professor had sent us to different areas in London to take pictures. My assigned place was Brixton, the home of David Bowie. I had felt so uncomfortable finding my route on the tube. So many colors and criss-crosses on the grid map, getting off the tube and trying to figure out if I went left or right to leave the station. Asking strangers for their pictures was an entirely different element.

I checked my watch. If I was going to make it to Asa Briggs, I had to turn around. Asa was our other academic building: 16 and 17 Young Street, Atlantic, and Asa Briggs. The names of Richmond's academic buildings were so foreign at first. Named after founders of the school and important people in England's history. At this point, they didn't stand out to me; they were like any other name on a class schedule. But they had come to be pieces of what made London home to me. I had to convince myself that there were plenty of days left to explore the city. And the sooner I got to class, the sooner I could get back to adventuring.

San Diego Can't Hang

“‘Berg.’ Uh... What does that mean?” Cait looked up from the map, puzzled by the German written on it.

“Well there’s a picture of a mountain next to the description. Maybe that’s what it is, a mountain,” Emily answered quietly. Dad. We referred to Emily as Dad. Like most fathers, she was good with directions, street smart, logical, and usually right. I was the Mom of the group. I always had spare napkins and tissues and snacks in my bag. I was the moral one too, not necessarily the wisest, but perhaps the most fair. Or at least I tried to be.

We were huddled around Cait on the top tier of the tram. Our flight from London to Switzerland had landed about an hour ago. I’d taken a three-hour nap the night before, and sleeping on the plane had been tricky. So I wasn’t exactly awake and excited for Zurich.

My friends and I had started planning our spring break trip weeks before. It was originally just Cait and Claire figuring out places they wanted to go. Like most nights, we had been hanging out in their room drinking cider and chatting about London. They had their computers open to travel sites and were talking over landmarks and tourist attractions, and one by one, we had invited ourselves to join. I jumped on board late, not sure if I wanted to commit to flights and hostels. But the later the semester got, the more I wanted to explore Europe with them. We talked about Prague, Poland, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Italy, and France; we wanted to see so many countries.

In the last weeks before break, Michaela, Zach, Emily, Eliana and I had committed to the trip. It would be seven of us in total. Our first stop would be Zurich. Then Milan, Florence, and

Rome. We had places to sleep and ideas of what we wanted to do. But besides our AirBnBs, we didn't have a set schedule.

In the Zurich airport, we found a currency exchange desk. We walked out of the airport and into the cold rain. *Another warm welcome to add to my travel log.* And then we took the tram to our AirBnB. The tram was the main mode of transportation in the city. It ran up through the streets, from residential areas to shopping squares.

Not one of us spoke German, so it was a little harder than expected to read the map in our hands. "Üetliberg," Cait tried to pronounce the mountain name. It sounded more like "Oot-lee-berg."

"I wanna hike a Swiss Alp so badly," I said. Let's do it!" It was never on my bucket list, but we were in Switzerland and if I didn't hike, I would've missed out.

We dedicated the entire next day to hiking. Claire the Californian only brought her black and tired Converse to hike in the snow. We all shook our heads at her. *My toes would get so cold and I would definitely slip,* I thought. Frostbite was a 0/10. My friends and I ranked things from zero to ten, zero being the worst, and ten being the best. Frostbite was so painful that it reserved the right to be a zero.

To combat the cold, I gave Claire my brown Sperry's, the only other shoes besides my black boots that I could cram into my backpack. At least they were a little thicker and there was more traction on the bottoms.

Claire still managed to slip up the mountain. One step forward, and she lost her balance. She crawled to her knees and scaled the first snowy hill we came across.

“San Diego can’t hang,” Cait said. We all laughed. The rest of us were from New England and the Midwest, where we lived and experienced snow at least once a year. Claire had never even seen it. Climbing a snowy mountain in a foreign country was new to her.

We were all struggling. At the bottom, the trail map gave us the option for a slow and steady hike, or a steep and advanced one. “F.T.E.” Michaela affirmed. F.T.E. Steep slope it was.

Minutes after starting the course, I struggled to breathe. And I was in shape. I ran almost every day in Hyde Park, and I didn’t expect to be so winded. At every corner, we stopped, hands on our knees in a recovery position. We passed around water bottles, already taking turns with the backpacks.

We wound our way upwards, looking over the trail sides at the trees and forest below. The incline gradually decreased, or we were just getting used to our shortness of breath. As we climbed up a long hill, I started feeling droplets on my nose and hands. My hat and rain jacket slowly started beading with white drops of water. I looked up to the sky and realized it had started snowing. I looked around me, and everyone else had stopped in their tracks, gazing up at the clouds. I watched as they muttered “Woah’s” and “Wow’s.” We all had awestruck looks. I felt like someone had just shaken up a snow globe, and we were inside it.

We came out of our trance and continued walking up. We reached a staircase up to an outlook point. But the staircase was enough of an outlook. The snow fell all around us as we paused for pictures. Snowflakes gathered on our jacket sleeves and on our hats. Claire threw a snowball at Cait, and then everybody joined in the snowball fight.

After we had enough dodging and ducking from this and that snowball, we proceeded up the mountain. The map said there was a restaurant at the top. We had our eye on the prize, even though it seemed like the prize was all around us. I felt like I was in a winter wonderland, stuck

in a never-ending snow cloud. Time stopped around us, and we lived in that moment for what seemed like forever.

We each had our chances of mishaps too. One, Cait almost slipped off the mountain. Two, Claire almost faced frostbite, because the shoes I gave her were not meant for hiking, and she had only three thin and worn-out ankle socks for the entire trip; they wouldn't keep her feet warm. As much as we were moving, her feet still got cold. And three, we were all suffering from snow dripping down our backs. After a right turn and what seemed like a never-ending hill, we made it to the restaurant. Or, one of them.

As soon as we entered Restaurant Gmüetliberg, I caught the smell of wet dog. *Maybe it's from people getting the furniture wet when they come in. Guess the chairs didn't dry well. Or they just didn't air the place out.* The only food available on the menu was macaroni and cheese, and there were no seats open. Dissatisfied, we left and kept walking until we found the top of the hill. There stood a cell tower, restaurant and hotel. Michaela wanted to climb the tower, but it was blocked off.

"Look guys! It's Olaf!" Claire said, elated.

"Kind of a sad one," Michaela responded. "It's missing an eye."

At the top was a small hill where people had wrapped a snowman with a scarf and buttons made out of rocks. This snowman was slowly falling apart, so we gathered up some snow to make our own.

From the hill, we took group pictures and looked out at the land below us. To the left, you couldn't see much because of cloud cover. But as the sun broke through, we could see the winding path of Lake Zurich. It looked more like a river than a lake, shaped more like an "S" than a somewhat circular pool of water. To the west, there was a valley of homes and snow-

covered trees. This was the Limmat Valley, the river valley where Lake Zurich became the River Limmat (Üetliberg). From this view, we could see the other mountains that formed the Swiss Alps. We could see for miles.

At 871 meters above sea level, we were all in awe of the surrounding mountains and fields. We watched the snow sparkle in the sunlight and the clouds cast shadows over the land as they drifted past. I was the last person to walk into the hotel. I gawked at the surroundings below, not sure if I'd ever have the chance to see them again. Finally, I turned my back and joined everyone at the back table of the restaurant. I was carrying a bag of potato chips in my backpack as we were hiking, and I brought them out when we got settled at our table. We snacked on them while we waited for our hot chocolate. I watched Cait as she gathered chips in her lap, periodically picked one up, and slowly passed the bag under the table so she would stay discreet. I followed suit, as did the rest of us. We made sure to swallow and wipe our faces. We slid crumbs off the side of the table as the waiter walked over.

"I'll have a hot chocolate, please," Cait requested.

"Would you like whipped cream?" the waiter asked politely.

"Oh yeah, for sure. Thanks!" Cait replied.

We all ordered hot chocolate. It was just what we needed to warm up. Plus, hot chocolate was our thing. We had to test it in every city we visited to see which place had the best beverage. This hot chocolate was not as good as the one from the day before, but still decent. It came with a piece of candy, which gave us the energy we needed for the rest of our hike. Whipped cream poured over the top of our mugs. We laughed as we turned to each other with whipped cream mustaches.

While warming up inside, there were two hail storms. Our table was in front of a window, where we could see the sky darken and open up, pelting hail to the ground. People rushed inside, looking for somewhere to sit out the storm. One family walked in with twin babies. The mother had one on her back, and the father had the other. They sat next to us, taking the babies out from their packs and laying them down at the end of the table. I stared intently, shocked to see such a young family making the trip.

Other people cleared out from the decks and grill outside. Conversation halted at the tables as hail pelted the glass windows. It went on and off like this for a good hour, the air growing thick with hail and rain, and then it would clear in a repeating cycle. I spaced out, watching the clouds move quickly across the sky.

We finished our hot chocolates, and we reached the bottom of the bag of chips. I could see the trees and mountains again as the storm moved past us.

“You pansies ready to get back out there?” Cait asked. That was her favorite word. Whenever she didn’t think we were game to do something or chickened out, we were pansies. I was forever determined to prove that I was not a pansy.

I smuggled the now-empty potato chip bag into my backpack and we bundled up and headed back out. The weather had cleared, but the sun was setting soon and we had to make it back to the bottom before the slopes got icy.

We all had an edge as we started the trek down. Everyone was secretly worried about not making it back before the snow become solid and slippery. To our surprise, going downhill was much easier than uphill. We climbed down the summit, down the staircase, and down the snowy hills Claire had slipped on earlier. We stopped a couple times for water and waited for whoever was our slowest member--usually San Diego-- to catch up.

We gripped on to the rails because the steep hills tried to take us down faster than we could handle. At some points, we inched downwards. But once we reached a low enough elevation where there was no snow, we could run down the hills. I got blisters from my toes jamming against the front of my shoes. *I'd rather blisters than crash into a tree any day.*

And we just let ourselves go down as fast as we could. The cool air running through our hair, breath returning to normal as we got closer to sea level, and a sense of triumph that we had just climbed a Swiss Alp. After witnessing its beauty and breathtaking overlook, I could understand why people put it on their bucket list.

Appreciation for the Simpler Style

“That guy is kinda scary looking,” Michaela whispered to me. We stood in the back right corner of the Duomo di Milano, admiring the detail on the statue’s body. The sculpture was of an extremely muscular, fit man who was bald and veiny. He had a book in his left hand and a towel draped over his shoulders.

I later looked him up and found out that he was Saint Bartholomew the Apostle, who was skinned alive by a pagan king. S. Bartholomew stood on a pedestal that read, “None me Praxiteles sed Marc finxit Agrat” (Sculpture: Museo del Duomo). The Latin meaning is “Not Praxiteles, but Marco from Agrate made me.” Marco was a student of Leonardo da Vinci.

I had read about da Vinci and Raphael and other renowned artists. But to see their works in person is a completely different experience. To look at a sculpture from multiple angles. To see and touch three-dimensional objects that you’ve only seen before on a textbook page. I’ve taken thousands of pictures that will never do the artists or their pieces the justice they deserve.

The Cathedral in Milan had so many pieces of art, and the cathedral itself was magnificent. Michaela and I took our times in museums and churches and at pretty much everything. Cait and Claire walked through the Cathedral with quick glances at the sculptures. We finally caught up to them, walking with our eyes glued to the ceiling and monuments above and below.

“Honestly, I like this better than Notre Dame,” I said to Claire. “It doesn’t seem like it gets enough attention.”

“Yeah same, dude” she responded.

We were a few of nearly five million people that visited the Duomo every year. As we entered, gargoyles stared us down, scowling and tensed. Unwelcoming. But once we stepped

inside, I felt at peace. Ornate décor lined the walls and doorframes. The vaulted ceiling rose high above us in wide arcs. People gathered around ticket windows and sculptures and plaques.

Emily took out her phone and shut it off. "I don't like taking pictures in churches. Pictures just don't do it justice."

I took a picture of Saint Bartholomew, and after that, I put my phone away. Emily was right. A picture was never going to live up to the real beauty of any church. And it would just take away from my face-to-face experience with the art.

We split up. I went with Michaela to the Crypt of St. Charles, the Terraces, and the Duomo Museum. Of all of my friends abroad, I was the most religious. And with my time here, I figured I would take advantage of everything the cathedral had to offer.

"We're gonna bounce," Cait stated, with Emily by her side. "We'll go walk around and meet up with you at, uh, 1:30?"

"Cool, cool. Sounds like a plan," I answered.

The Crypt of St. Charles was very crowded. Staff members ushered people in and out, trying to prevent crowds and impatient visitors from waiting in line. The room was bright, filled with royal colors and gold embroidered castings and decorations. St. Charles was far out of reach, behind a gate. From a distance, he did not seem to mind all the visitors disturbing his eternal slumber.

Walking up the cramped and low-ceilinged stairs to the Terraces, I had flashbacks to the Vatican in Rome. I had been to Rome the previous May with a group of students and we also explored the different parts of the cathedral, including the terraces. Anytime I've travelled abroad, I've tried to visit the local churches. I've done the same in the states, but it was more of a priority abroad because I didn't know when I'd be back. The Vatican was my favorite cathedral.

If I had to rank the cathedrals I visited, it would be the Vatican, the Duomo, and then Notre Dame. I appreciated the simplicity of the Duomo. Sure, millions of people visited every year, but there was not as much hype surrounding it as Notre Dame. The cathedral in Paris is, although Gothic, lavish and large and lets you know it's there. The Duomo di Milano lets you explore it for all it is worth. You're paying more for an experience at the Duomo than you are for the tourist destination that Notre Dame has become.

When we had walked into the Duomo, I picked up a brochure about the history and architecture. The Duomo first came into being in the 14th century. In 1386, Archbishop Antonio da Saluzzo created a plan to build a new Cathedral at the site of Santa Maria Maggiore. The cathedral went through three eras of construction. The Visconti era was named after the Lord of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti. From 1387 to 1447, he put supervisors in charge of building and design. He decided to use Candoglia marble for the entire Cathedral. During the Sforza era, the nave and aisles were built, and stained glass windows were put in place. From 1560-1650, Archbishops Carlo and Federico Borromeo based stylistic elements of the Duomo on the Catholic Reformation. One painting that demonstrated this was of San Carlo. Since the 17th and 18th centuries, additions to the Cathedral were installed. These included the main spire, complete ornamental designs, and lots of restorative processes.

It was one thing to experience and read about the history of the Duomo during the day. After eating and exploring more of the city, we returned to the piazza at night. The Duomo was illuminated by night-lights and the Square was alive with life. Pigeons cooed about and surrounded people with whatever crumbs of bread they could find. We each took a turn running through the crowd of pigeons just for the hell of it. Just to watch them all panic and flutter in all directions. It was so satisfying and definitely a bucket list must-do.

One singer sat with his dog, attracting a large crowd as he belted out “All of Me” and “Hallelujah.” He was incredibly talented. We split up and reconvened on the curb to just sit and listen to him sing. A lady was singing at the opposite end of the cathedral square, with lots of energy and in a foreign language.

Cait turned to us, eager and wide-eyed. “Guys, let’s help a sister out. Let’s get the party started over there!” Cait was the Energizer Bunny: she was up and running all the time. She kicked our asses out of bed in the early hours of the morning and got us riled when we were slowing down at night. That nightt, she got the crowd started for the little old Italian lady. Cait danced up and down, circling the woman and singing into a fake microphone. We all joined in, suddenly overtaken by the woman’s spirit and the lively music.

When we had our share of dancing, we walked back over to the singing man and his dog. We sat and listened, mesmerized by the sound and aura of the night. A French boy at Richmond had previously told me that you have to dance with your heart and feel the music. I had no intentions of dancing in the square, but I could definitely feel the music. And the night. We were sitting in MILAN, something I never imagined I would do. It felt like a dream. I was silenced by the surroundings, as were my friends. The air was cold, but there was a spirit in the night that kept us going. Until I heard someone’s stomach rumble and gurgle. I turned to Claire, who was sitting next to me with a fake innocent expression on her face. I knew it was her that made the noise.

“So, uh, round three of gelato?” she asked.

Mesmerized by David

I thought Michaela was going to lose her cool. She found out how indecisive of a shopper, no, a person, I was. We bounced between three stores that sold authentic leather jackets. Before Florence, I could never picture myself wearing one. I felt like I could never pull off the look, that it wasn't me. When in ~~Rome~~ Florence! I had to buy some piece of Italian clothing for myself. I thought I wanted a red jacket, or a black or grey one. One of the stands pretty much sold me on a jacket, but it wasn't 100 percent real leather, and I wasn't 100 percent keen on the price. Michaela and I eventually found a store that was willing to compromise. The woman working was middle-aged, blonde, and Australian. I wasn't sure if I could trust an Australian selling Italian clothing. *Was it real? Was I getting my money's worth?* I wasn't sure, but when I had tried on one jacket and then another, I settled on the second one, not knowing what the price was.

"Two hundred twenty euros" the saleswoman told me. "But for you, we'll make an exception. This is one of our last makes of this kind. Two hundred."

I turned to Michaela, looking for her to tell me what to do. "I really like the jacket," she told me. "But it is pretty expensive. But 200 could be worse. But it is a lot if you don't want it."

We went back and forth like this for fifteen minutes. I took the jacket off and I put it back on. I spun in the mirror, I asked the lady if it was too tight or if I looked okay in it. *Of course she's going to tell me it looks great, she's trying to sell it to me!*

Michaela and I huddled by the mirror, trying to think of a price to compromise with. I had only bargained once before in my life, and it was for an *I <3 NYC* sweatshirt. This was a step up: a 100 percent authentic *leather* jacket.

“I can give you 140 or 160, but I can’t give you 200” I said, turning back to the Australian woman. “If it’s more than that, I’m sorry, I can’t afford it.”

Her eyes darted back and forth. I could tell she was panicking. She answered, “Even 150 is too low for this jacket. It’s a really nice jacket and I just can’t sell it that low. I can do 190.”

I still wasn’t satisfied. “How about 170?”

She hesitated. “One hundred eighty. But that’s the lowest I can go.” She said it firmly, and I knew she wasn’t willing to compromise anymore.

I handed over my credit card, really having to persuade myself that it was okay to spend that kind of money. I had spent the semester so far buying only the essential groceries at Sainsbury’s, eating in the dining hall, when there were so many other places I could go out to eat in London. And now I was spending almost 200 euros on a jacket? I watched her run the chip in my card, horrified and second-guessing my decision.

Both the saleswoman and I were exhausted by the end of our transaction. I’m sure she was happy to make a sale, but she lost some money too. As we walked out of the store, Michaela asked me, “You okay?” She followed up with a nervous laugh.

“Um. Hello? No, I’m not okay!” I answered. “Like, what did I just do? Ugh.”

I kept walking, my lips tight with anxiety. “Nah, nah, I’ll get over it. It’ll be fine, really.” The jacket weighed down my already-stuffed bag. I had new souvenirs, extra clothes, and the Brita® I always carried. I was in denial that I just spent that much money on myself. I never do that.

Michaela was a psychology major, and ever since she told me that, I felt like she was psychoanalyzing me. Especially in that moment. I was definitely going to hit every one of the

five stages of grief. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance. I was hoping to just skip right to the last step.

“Let’s just keep walking,” I said. I picked up the pace, holding onto my backpack a little tighter. “If I stop now, I’ll change my mind and convince myself I don’t need it. Which I don’t, but you know what I mean.”

We walked the streets around the Duomo, turning left, passing a restaurant, turning right, passing a store of handmade leather bound journals and books. I stopped in and bought myself a purple leather journal. It was a small expense compared to the jacket, so I justified it. But that was it. That was all I would get myself in Florence, or else I wouldn’t be able to afford gifts for the boatload of people I still had on my list.

It was late afternoon by the time we were sick of walking loops around Santa Maria del Fiore. Our tickets from the morning were still valid for the Giotto’s Bell Tower, which we had yet to do. We purposely waited until the sun was setting to climb up to the top and get a view of the city.

We were among the last people to enter the Tower. One more hour, and it would be closed for the day. Our last chance for a city view. Halfway up the steps, I realized I was either very out of shape or very tired from all the walking I had done over the course of the week. My legs were burning and I had to keep clearing my throat to get in air. The walkway was narrow and I felt like the walls were closing in on me as they wound higher.

We reached the first level, where a bell hung in the middle and plaques of information hung on the sidewalls. It wasn’t the bell currently in use; that one wasn’t visible to the public.

I stepped up and off to the side, and all dramatic, I immediately fell against the wall. “Michaela, I’m not gonna make it.” I said between breaths. “Go on without me.”

She was up on the ledge, a small enough gap in the wall that she wouldn't fall through, but big enough to take pictures through. "And you call yourself a runner? Do you stink up our breakfast table and drip sweat all over the place for nothing?"

I could always count on Michaela to tell me like it is.

One of the plaques said it was four hundred steps to the top of the Tower. It was almost 300 feet tall, which I believed considering the climb we just made. The plaque stated the history of the Tower and how the artist Giotto began building it in 1334. The Tower represented 14th century Gothic style architecture. Where we stood, the stonewall and floors between the first and second level weren't very exciting, but the outside walls were decorated in white, red, and green marble. At the top, according to the plaque, was a panoramic roof, where you could see an all-around view of the city center.

I mustered up the energy to get to the top, as did Michaela. When we got there, the sun was setting between clouds. I could see a line of mountains in the distance, and thousands of rooftops. There was hardly any walking room in the city; the streets were narrow and lined with old buildings. People stood in the piazza below, like little black ants trying to decide where to go.

An American couple walked around the roof, a young photographer following them and snapping their picture. Michaela definitely could've done a better job. She had a secret knack for taking candid. Secret because I didn't know she was taking any of me until she posted them on social media.

It was a pretty cool sight. It didn't "Wow" me as much as the London Eye or the Swiss Alps. Not that bird's eye views ever bore me, they're just not as shocking as the first time around. But it was a view I wouldn't get anywhere else. Walking up the Bell Tower in Florence would never be the same: it wouldn't be the same day with the same people or the same

experience. We walked around the roof terrace until the sinking sun made it too hard to see the city below.

The city of Florence was not the view I was waiting to see. I kept all my excitement and hopes for the Statue of David the next day. In my freshman year of college, I took art history and politics classes and I learned about the legend of David. When I went to Rome my sophomore year, I thought his statue was there, but he was a few hours north. I jumped on the opportunity to go to Florence when my friends said they wanted to go to Italy for Spring Break. But no one was as interested in seeing him as I was. Michaela and Zach agreed to go with me, but I felt like I was dragging them along.

David was in La Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze. When we finally found our way to the Accademia Gallery, I really tried to pace myself through it. But I was so excited about David that I wasn't focused on any other pieces of art that I saw. He was in the back gallery, where there was a workshop of plasters being made and sculptures being reconstructed. This was the busiest gallery in the entire museum. I walked over cautiously, masking my hurriedness so no one could think I was crazy.

I stopped front and center and I just stared. Almost 17 feet tall, and just one block of marble. According to the information board next to it, Michelangelo wanted to recreate a block of marble abandoned in the courtyard of the Cathedral of Florence. Over the centuries, it became more than a block. It was a symbol of liberty and pride for the Florentine Republic. The city associated itself with the story of the young hero. In the story, David was a smaller guy, stronger and smarter than he looked. He ultimately defeated Goliath. Like David, the city of Florence

stood strong in battle. Through centuries of wars and clashes, Florence believed it had exceeded society's expectations to become a strong and powerful city.

Michaela and Zach looked around the gallery at the other paintings and sculptures. I gawked at David for a solid twenty minutes, taking pictures from the left, right, front and back. The curvature of his upper back, the ridges of his ribs, the tone in his arms, the bulge of his thigh muscles: I couldn't get over how perfectly human it all was. David represented the ideal male, at least at the time he was constructed. I asked myself: *Michelangelo did all this with tools from centuries ago? Basically from rock?* I can't even carve my name into a tree and make it legible. I was amazed at Michelangelo's talent and how his sculpture has stood the test of time.

I was so consumed by David that nothing else was on my mind. I wasn't worried about being American in a foreign city and not knowing the language. I wasn't worried about being thousands of miles from home. I wasn't worried about money or finding the next place for a free bathroom. There was purpose for being in Florence, seeing the Statue of David. No matter where I read about him or saw pictures, I would never get the full effect of seeing him until I was standing a few feet away. No wandering thoughts. Just David and I, David looking off into the distance and me looking at him. And then a bunch of other people doing the same thing.

Michaela and Zach circled back to where I was standing. I went off about how awed I was by David.

"Too bad all guys don't look like this," Michaela said. Then she turned to Zach. "You better hit the gym when we get back to the States."

Adventure Weekend

I stared out the window of the train, my eyes heavy from lack of sleep. We hadn't gotten back until 3 a.m. from our St. Patrick's Day festivities. It's not that we were out dancing until the break of dawn. We had spent hours pacing the streets, trying to figure out the ride home. In the dark, London was a foreign place. Having lived in the city for two months, I still couldn't figure out the night bus. But we eventually found Bus 14 and I thanked the Lord we made it back to our flat. Four hours later, I woke up for my 9 a.m. Video Production class. So yes, I was struggling to stay awake.

Last weekend was the end of Spring Break. I was still worn out from the long days of walking and traveling. When I had booked my Wales reservation, it was weeks before I left for London, and I was begging for adventure. I intended on traveling every weekend with no sweat. No problems with money, no periods of extreme exhaustion or fatigue. Wrong. I had to psyche myself up for this trip. Now, as I stared out the window, I thought back to the cliff jumping pictures on the company website: blue waters, big heights, and the thrill on their faces. I sure as hell hoped that would be me.

It was a small group. Emily, my adventure buddy, sat in the seat across from me. She was the only one of our friends who was not pissing me off. We spent a lot of time together on Spring Break, and I just needed more time to myself, or at least some quiet. Emily could shut up and get the hint when I didn't want to talk; she was quiet by nature. When we weren't talking, it wasn't an awkward silence either. We were comfortable in each other's company.

We had reserved about 20 seats on the train, but hardly anyone signed up for the trip. There were nine of us: two R.A.s and seven students. I could sprawl out in my own seat. Feet

kicked up and head back against the window, we left Paddington Station. And no, I didn't have time to buy a Paddington Bear before I left.

Around 5:30pm, after about five hours since we'd left London, our second train rolled into Pembrokeshire, Wales. Our tour guide from Preseli Venture picked us up at the station. The ride to the lodge was about 15 to 20 minutes, where again, I almost dozed off. Until I found out that macaroni and cheese awaited us. As soon as I dropped by bags in the dorm, I ran to fill my plate. It was the cheesiest pasta I had ever eaten. And it wasn't the cheap, tiny pieces of macaroni either, but huge tubes of rigatoni. With a good, home cooked meal to welcome us to Wales, I felt better about the upcoming weekend.

Attached to the dining room was the lodge's main hangout area. A fireplace in the corner, couches, foosball, books, and board games made the place cozy. From the floor-to-ceiling windows, we could see the rolling hills of pasture that edged towards the shoreline. After exploring the lodge, everyone went to bed, anticipating the busy day that lay ahead.

The agenda for Saturday: breakfast at 8am, coasteering in the afternoon, warm up at the lodge, lunch, surfing or sea kayaking, dinner, and down time. "What the hell is coasteering?" Emily asked me. "I have no idea," I responded. "I know we're cliff jumping and we have to get all decked out in gear, so it's gotta be intense."

Putting on the gear was only half the battle. Davey and Will, our activity leaders, introduced us to the equipment and explained in detail what coasteering was. According to our guides, it was an adventure sport. We would be rock climbing along the coast, cliff jumping, and swimming inside caves.

Our agenda of adventure came with a shock, mainly from the coldness in the air. Davey and Will fitted us for booties, wetsuits, hoods, helmets, gloves, vests, and shorts. I shrugged into my wetsuit, chilled by the air and excitement of what we were about to do.

After ten minutes in the van, we reached our destination: Abercastle. Once on the beach, we waded into the water with all of our gear on. I had to buy a new pair of sneakers specifically for this trip, so I could specifically wreck them in the water. We waded until we couldn't stand, and from there, we swam. We swam out to the rocks and climbed those until we reached the top of our first cliff. I stuck to the middle of our group, not too eager, but not too timid either. Will jumped first, showing us proper form and execution. One by one, we jumped and swam to the nearby cave. We walked deep into the cave, until it was too dark to see and the walls closed in on us.

Light flooded the air as we swam-stumbled out of the cave. We made our way to our next cliff. It was higher, but still manageable. The third cliff was daunting. But I had to jump it.

"F.T.E." Emily whispered in my ear. *For. The. Experience.* I had to live up to our semester motto. This was one of those things that was daunting to think about, something that I could easily back out of. But in the end, would be completely worth it... I had hoped.

I was the fourth jumper to go. I sat at the top of the cliff, in launch position. I sat for what seemed like ages, thinking of all the things that could have gone wrong once I let go: I could've broken my neck, or shattered my leg. *Would I get a bad wedgie? How deep is it?* At this point, I was stalling, talking myself out of the jump.

But Davey talked me back into it. "You're all set. Looking good. You got this," he reassured me. Time to let go.

Time to let go of so many things. Like the fear of missing out on things at home, the fear of what lay ahead in the semester that I didn't know yet, or the fear of not meeting deadlines for my assignments due after the weekend. I had to just jump into the semester, all or nothing, without my worries holding me back.

The last time I had gone cliff jumping was with my aunt in Lake George, New York. I didn't wear any equipment, and I was jumping into the calm waters of a lake. I had been with family, in a place I was familiar with. Now I was jumping into the churning waters of the ocean. To be so far away from home and be doing the same thing without them was a little daunting. I made a promise to myself, that at least for this weekend, I would just take the leap. I wouldn't worry about what was at the bottom or the other side, as long as it was safe, of course.

I let go of the rock I was holding on to, and pushed off. I screamed, falling through the air. Heart pounding, I caught one last breath before I hit the water. I sunk deeper as water splashed high above me. The jump was about thirty feet. Looking up at it, it didn't seem that high. But as I was standing up there, it felt more than high enough. Feeling a rush of adrenaline, I kicked to the surface and shot two thumbs up. *I did it! Now I can do anything! I won't take up a career in free falling, but at least I can say I went cliff jumping in Wales!*

I jumped once more, as did everyone else. The adrenaline rush was not as great as the first time, but I still loved the thrill. I treaded water for a few minutes, and then realizing how cold and exhausted I was, I climbed back up the cliff. We headed back to the beach to change and jump back in the van. Then back to the lodge to warm up and reenergize.

We sat on the couches, satisfied and finally warm. Nobody had a preference of sea kayaking or surfing. I desperately wanted to go surfing, and my hand shot up in the air when

Will asked the group what our next adventure would be. I was like the little know-it-all kid from elementary school. He fusses in his seat, dying to answer the teacher's question. "Surfing it is," Will answered, laughing at my excitement.

We sprawled out on the beach with our boards in a circle. The air was cold and damp, and to get our blood pumping, we warmed up with some running and somersaults on the beach. We practiced the pop-up motions that surfers used to ride a wave in. "Once you feel the wave under you, push off with your hands and jump up," Will explained. "Bend your knees, not too much, but enough so that you're stable. And spread your arms out to keep your balance." He demonstrated and we practiced the motions.

Emily and I were super excited to be surfing in Wales, but no one seemed to share our enthusiasm. They looked cold and like they were going through the motions because they had to, not because they wanted to.

We finished our warm-up with some jumping jacks and technique questions. Then we straightened out our gear and hit the waves. Once we were far enough out, we stopped and sat up on our boards. I could hear Davey's instructions echoing in my head. *Stop, turn halfway so you're looking out at the waves. Then swing your feet around in the water so that you're facing shore. Then paddle, paddle, paddle!*

I was pretty chilly, but too focused on surfing to let the cold get to me. I caught the smell of low tide as I turned my head. Salt water dripped from my cap and into my mouth. I loved the sensations of surfing. Even the constricting wet suit didn't bother me. It was all part of the experience.

Nicole and Becky, two other girls in our group, got out of the water after half an hour. Everyone else slowly trickled out. Will and Davey took turns taking pictures and surfing with us.

Turn sideways, look out, turn the board, paddle, paddle, paddle, pop-up! Repeat. Most times it was topple over or nose dive instead of pop-up. I took at least ten spills. Sometimes I got to my knees, and other times I just leaned too far forward or too far back. But every time I crashed, I came back up and out with a burning desire to stand up on my board. I was determined to ride a wave in to shore.

Emily and I were in the water for about two hours. We crashed, heard a lot of “Almost,” and also a lot of “You were so close!” Davey told us we had two more rides. Pressure on. Once I got situated for my wave, I stared the shoreline down. *I can feel it, this is the one. C'mon Elaine!* The threat of time pushed me to perform. I pumped my arms until the wave was under me, then I popped up and found my surf stance. Riding the wave into shore, I felt like the great surfer Bethany Hamilton. I probably did not look as skilled, but I felt just as good as if I had won a surfing competition. I pumped my fist in the air and screamed, “Woo hoo! I did it! And I'll do it again!”

My First English Easter

I'm not going to make it. Nope, nope, definitely not. Way too many people. I had never seen the tube so crowded. I completely underestimated the amount of spectators there would be for the race. Not only was it Easter Sunday, but it was also the Oxford versus Cambridge Boat Race. Yes, I wanted to see the men who were rowing, but I also wanted to see it because it was Oxford and Cambridge. Being the academic enthusiast that I was, I dreamed of going to big-name schools like those. The year before, I had inquired about studying for a semester at Oxford. But the admissions counselor told me that I didn't have the grades. I was better off at Richmond anyways. I wouldn't have had time to explore and make friends if I was studying at Oxford.

I was running late per usual and so was the tube. We pulled up to the Hammersmith stop, and everyone stumbled out. Crowds were already forming on the bridge, but people still tried to squeeze their way to the front, or they gave up and ran to the next lookout spot. There was a constant flow of people between the tube stop and Hammersmith Bridge. I took out my phone to call Emily. She had left earlier with a group of friends we'd met in Scotland. The signal was terrible; "Call Failed" came up on my screen three times before she finally answered.

"Hey!" I shouted into the phone. "Are you still at Hammersmith?"

"No, we're on the other side," she said. I could barely hear her. "I'll walk towards you. These guys aren't really into the race anyways."

"Okay! I'll stay where I am. Call me when you're, like, in the middle of the bridge."

"Okay. I'll be there in a minute."

It really was a nice day for a race. I still needed my fleece, but the sun was out; I finally had reason to break out my sunglasses. The weather was still pretty unpredictable, but overall, it was getting warmer. There was more sun than grey sky, which lifted my mood. Winter in

London had meant there was an indecisive sky overhead almost all the time: rain poured for one hour and it stopped the next. There wasn't much snow, but freezing rain didn't exactly warm the soul.

The wind was stronger up on the bridge, but I appreciated being outdoors anyway. Sitting in the Thames below were the two racing boats, ready to go. Other officiating boats were off to the side, making sure each racer was still and the boats were in line with one another. I couldn't remember how the race started because I couldn't hear the horn over the crowds. One second the water was still, and the next, people were shouting and waving their university flags over the bridge. I watched the boats until they turned the corner, snapping as many pictures as I could. I couldn't get a clear view; people's heads were in the way, no matter where I turned. The officiating boats were much larger than the ones actually racing. As the crew teams got further down the river, I couldn't tell which one belonged to which university.

My phone started buzzing. "Hey," Emily said. "I'm on the bridge. What are you wearing? I'm looking for you."

"My North Face and my brown purse! I'll start waving. You're coming from the far side of the bridge?"

"Yeah. I think I see you."

"Uh, okay, I don't see you. Oh wait, there you are!"

Emily walked across the street towards me. "Hey!" I shouted. "Want to find another place to see them? Maybe there's a restaurant playing it on TV or something."

"Sure," she responded. She was a woman of few words.

We walked across the bridge side that Emily had just come from. There was a tent set up outside of the closest restaurant. The radio was blasting with updates on the race.

“Oxford’s in the lead. They’re going to have to stay steady if they want to win this one!”

The commentator exclaimed.

We stood near the water, unable to see the boats. People started clearing out, giving us room to lean against the railing and just people watch. Someone had draped mini flags over the railing. One of the waitresses was handing out university flags; I grabbed an Oxford one, and I gave Emily one for Cambridge. We posed in front of the river for a picture, for proof that we were at the legendary race. Emily snagged the flag strip hanging on the post.

“I’m takin’ this,” she said, folding it in her purse. “Whoever had it, left it. I’ll hang it up in my room when I get back home.”

“Oo, good idea!” I responded.

“And we have a change in leaders!” the radio echoed. “The Cambridge men’s team is now in front. Both teams still look strong though. Only a few more minutes and we’ll have a winner!”

We hung around the radio listening for the final call. People weaved around us, trying to get back on the tube or to wherever their Easter pub-crawl brought them next.

“And they have reached Chiswick Bridge! They hit the four-mile mark! Cambridge has won the race! What a turn around!” That was all we needed to hear. I favored Oxford, but it wasn’t their time to win. We had no other reason to stay in the area, so we headed back for the tube. Emily and I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. Since it was just the two of us, we decided on a classic Nando’s visit. It was down the street from the Earl’s Court tube stop, near our flat at Courtfield.

Emily had introduced it to me. My friends back home called it “Cheeky Nando’s.” I had about a month left in London, and I still didn’t know what cheeky meant. As much as the English

language is still English wherever you go, I had many more words to learn from the British. Nando's was a sit-down chicken restaurant. It wasn't fast food, but I could count on them to make my order quickly when I was hungry. Chicken, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, fries: definitely the place to find comfort food. I couldn't compare it to a restaurant in New England. It was uniquely Nando's.

And it was much different than my typical Easter dinner. My regular Easter meal back home was ham and green beans, quiche, and lots of chocolate eggs. This was my first holiday that I wasn't home for. I had talked to my family earlier over Skype, wishing them a happy Easter. My brother's girlfriend had replaced me in our annual Easter egg hunt. I got over it; after all, I was having Easter in England. They couldn't say they were doing that!

Easter without my family at church and at home was bittersweet. Zach and I had gone to church together that morning with some friends I made at Imperial College. But it just didn't feel right, not being with my family to celebrate the day.

I realized it would be the first of many holidays I would potentially spend without them. After college, I hoped to move out and start my own life. Who knew where I'd end up? But for that day, Sunday, March 27th, I had to start a new tradition. Emily, my fan fic husband, was my dinner date. And we were waiting for the tube back to Kensington. It didn't have to be a lasting tradition. But it would be one for the books.

Sunset at Primrose

“Somebody once told me the world was gonna roll me / I ain’t the sharpest tool in the shed.” I turned up the volume on my phone so everyone could hear our song loud and clear.

“She was looking kind of dumb with her finger and her thumb / in the shape of an “L” on her forehead” Claire sang on. She knew it by heart, and the rest of us chimed in when we remembered a line and backed off when we didn’t.

We sat in a circle on the hill, a little less than halfway down the slope. My phone sat in the middle, blasting “All Star,” our theme song for the semester. It was 8:36p.m. on May 4th, our last night in London. We were here, there, and everywhere the past few days, trying to see the sights of the city we had not yet been to. Buying a painting on Brick Lane. Walking through St. James’ park. Taking pictures at the Tower of London.

And somehow, we all made it back to spend those last hours together. Cait and Claire came from having one last meat pie at the Blackbird pub. I met up with Michaela and Zach at the Gloucester Tube Entrance. Emily and Vanessa met us there. They spent the afternoon riding their last two tube lines, the DLR and the Metropolitan.

Everyone had their London bucket lists. One of mine was to see the sunset from Primrose Hill. Primrose is the highest hill in Regent’s Park. Eton College purchased it in 1841 so that the poorer people living in northern London could use it. In its earlier use, people dueled and others gathered to watch the fights. Today, it is more of a hangout spot and a place to watch the sunset. It is one of six protected viewpoints in London. It is 63 meters tall, and in the wintertime, people can see as far northeast as the city of Hampstead. In 1864, “Shakespeare’s Tree,” an oak tree on the hill, was planted to mark his 300th birthday. The city replaced it with a new oak tree in 1964 (Primrose Hill).

Besides the tree and Hampstead, there was so much else visible from the top of the hill. You could see the fences of the London Zoo on the outskirts of Regent's Park. Or the city skyline and the surrounding area. Groups of people around our age gathered with their high-tech cameras and sat on benches and picnic blankets. The air was buzzing with conversations of different languages, laughter, and deep, metaphysical debates. Some people had picnic snacks as they watched the sky fade into darkness. It was not a real darkness though. It never is in the city.

On the other side of the hill, there was a baseball game going on. Mixed teams of guys and girls, the guys overly competitive and the girls still learning how to properly swing a bat. They were finishing up as the sun slipped under the trees and they lost pretty much all visibility.

I lost all visibility, or orientation I should say, from rolling down the hill with Michaela and Claire. Yes, like a little kid who gets covered in grass stains and scream-laughes all the way down. There was no one to judge or care. I didn't know anyone there besides my friends, and they wouldn't laugh at me for being immature. They would join in with me.

There were no bad moods or frustrations that night. No grudges about going to Primrose the night before with only half the squad or making someone late or not being able to do this or that. A soft sadness hung in the air, awaiting the coming day when we had to say goodbye. But the laughs and upbeat reminiscing overpowered any glum we felt.

"Look, there's Big Ben! And the Eye. Dude, that was so long ago when we all went up that with the school," I interrupted as Smash Mouth finished their last lyric.

"Are we still going to try and go there to hear it chime tonight?" Emily asked.

"Dude, I'm sick as a dog, I'll try and rally, but I have to finish packing too," Cait added.

Although we were all happy to be together, we were all slightly stressed. Our rooms had to be in tip-top shape. We had to fit everything for the semester in one suitcase under 50 pounds.

I had a mental checklist in my head going, making sure I bought souvenirs or postcards for everyone on my list. And I would finally be reunited with my family after the longest time I had ever been away from them.

What would that be like? I wondered. Would I ever be back here? Would it ever feel the same without this group of people I had come to love in such a short time?

I forced myself to stop thinking about everything but being on Primrose Hill with my friends. Light bounced off of the Shard and the London Eye lit up with color. I scanned the skyline left and right, back and forth, seeing it transform as the night began. The night air was warm. I could finally walk around without my winter coat. I was in my happy place: in a park, in the open air, with space to stretch out, with the city in motion as I watched it from a distance. And I felt far from alone.

“Man, I’m gonna go home and no one is gonna understand Taxi Cab Night,” Cait said disappointingly. “Or that night in Florence. Or the Dutch pancake place.” I thought about the pizza-sized pancakes from My Old Dutch on High Street Kensington. The healthy one I got with asparagus and chicken and tomatoes. And the people that sat with me eating there. Even if we were not voicing it, we all felt the same way. Even if we told our friends from home every detail multiple times, they still wouldn’t get it. *They weren’t there.*

They were not there to see how the city had changed me. I’d gone from being completely overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle, the constant cars whizzing past in the late hours of the morning to learning to appreciate that one quiet moment when you finally settle in your room or make it to the destination you never thought you would reach. To thriving off of the liveliness of the city and using it to fuel my own lack of energy. To having day trips: eating crazy cereal combinations at the Serial Killer Café, getting off at random tube stops and seeing what was

there. We always found something new to do. Lookouts like Primrose gave me a chance to think about the entirety of what I had accomplished and seen in my semester. And I could see that London, as big as it felt, was just a mere fraction of what the world had to offer.

I could tell my friends were feeling the same way. Their whimsical expressions, the way they held that smile a second longer than they needed to at a joke, and the sad gleam in their eyes they tried to mask with constant chatter and talk of memories.

We walked up to the peak for a picture before the daylight hours completely ran out. “Let’s go shortest to tallest. No, wait. Me in the middle ‘cuz I’m the only boy.” Zach tried to organize us.

“Dammit guys, we’re not gonna have this figured out by the time we leave tomorrow! It’s just a picture! And we’re sitting anyways, so height doesn’t matter Zach.” Cait was getting frustrated. We were highly dysfunctional sometimes. Finally, the six of us got settled in a line, backs to the camera, arms linked around each other. We held out the Shaka sign, a hand gesture we all had adapted as a greeting and farewell. We smiled into the distance, aware that we were not even facing the camera, but we just had so much to feel good about.

Click. Of the iPhone camera. *Tick-tock.* Of the hands on Big Ben. Of the end of the semester.

Epilogue

BEEP. BEEP. My phone alarm went off at 8:30a.m. I sat up, for a second forgetting where I was. Then I remembered. It was my last morning in London. The last day of my semester abroad. And it was time for me to get my ass out of bed and head out for the last time with the Running Squad. Cait, Zach and I had set out nearly every day of the week this semester. Most of the time we ran in Hyde Park, but we explored other parks and streets in London too. Today, we had to run through Hyde Park to come full circle. We visited it on our first day of the semester, and we had to be there for our last.

I met up with Zach at Atlantic House half an hour later. He stood stretching at the base of the stairs, still shaking off sleep. Cait finally answered my text. She was not going to make it. *Not really feeling it.*

Cait came from a family of runners, doing half-marathons with her mom and going to cross country camp in high school. She was the runner I always wanted to be. Zach ran to stay in shape for soccer. He was my first dedicated running buddy for the semester, and then I found Cait. We really bonded over it. You get close to people when you push through sprints and early morning long runs. None of our other friends were as active or willing to push themselves on the miles. Running is not for everyone, but I am so fortunate I found people to run with during the semester. As independent as I wanted to be abroad, I wouldn't have had the motivation to run alone for four months.

We all came back late from Primrose the night before. Finals were over and there was no need to rush back to our dorms. So we had downed a few drinks and explored the city until we couldn't stay awake.

By the time I had to wake up, I was fortunately not hung-over. From experience earlier in the semester, running with a hangover felt like death. I was feeling great, except for the sad fact that my adventure was coming to an end. And that Cait was not joining us, after planning this run practically since the beginning of the semester.

“Ready for our last run?” Zach asked me. I nodded, upset that it was our last time in Hyde Park and upset that it would probably be our last run together. He lived in Wisconsin, and I lived in Rhode Island. The rest of my study abroad friends lived all across the country too. I prayed that today wouldn’t be the last time I saw them.

We started out on the main pathway, passing the duck pond and Kensington Palace. To think, this place seemed so foreign to me back in January. Now, I knew it like I grew up in London. We had covered all 330 acres of Hyde Park over the course of a few months. We covered every path. Today, we made sure to pass all of the important landmarks in the Park. The duck pond, Kensington Palace, the Serpentine, Kensington Gardens, the Peter Pan statue, and more things I didn’t know the name of. Peter Pan never wanted to grow up, and neither did I. I was having the best semester of my life. I didn’t want to leave it behind. I wanted to stay young and adventurous forever. At least Peter Pan could keep dreaming.

It was a great day for a run. Warm enough for shorts and a t-shirt, but not so humid that sweat dripped down my neck. Perfect for a healthy, half-hour run. I looked left and right as I ran, trying to remember what the park looked like from every angle. Zach and I didn’t talk much. Just mild conversation about breakfast and how we were going to spend the rest of our day. I did not want to say goodbye to the park or the place I had grown to love. Then again, I didn’t want to drag out my run any longer than it had to be. It is running, after all: not exactly painless.

“We gotta end this run on a good note, Elaine,” Zach said. “Sprint to the gate?”

“Ugh, you’re right,” I responded. “Let’s do it. All out!” And off we went, to the end of the run, to the end of the semester. My legs held back, but I knew in my heart that I could only keep moving forward. *Just a few more strides to the gate, and it’s over. It will all be over.*

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Appendix A: Creative Nonfiction Book Notes

from *The Best of American Travel Writing, 2009*

As I read, I took notes on plot devices and writing techniques that the authors used. The following documents are scanned pages from two separate chapters. The first is about the narrator arriving in Damascus, and the second is about swimming in the Chuckchi Sea.

DANIEL ALARCÓN

You Do Not Represent the Government of the United States of America

FROM *The Virginia Quarterly Review*

↑ opening
scene

WE WERE LATE arriving in Damascus, though I can't remember exactly why. There was traffic coming out of Aleppo, or perhaps we got lost in Damascus, or perhaps the stop for strong, bitter coffee along the way — our driver's eyes kept fluttering closed — took longer than it should have. In any case, our group of seven American poets, novelists, and journalists was well behind schedule, and there was nothing we could do about it. We drove: desert, scrub-brush hills, then Damascus, a city, with all the requisite noise and chaos. Our two guides, the preternaturally calm Hassan, a teacher, and Fatih, a pharmacist with reddish-brown hair and a broad, welcoming smile, were both from Aleppo, and they didn't know their way around. It was such a helpless feeling: any corner might represent the correct turn, or the absolute wrong one, and we had no way of knowing the difference. There were no street signs we Americans could read and no one we could ask; between the seven of us, we spoke maybe a half-dozen words of Arabic, and none had ever been to Syria.

culture
shock

We finally made it to the University of Damascus and were wandering around the campus, looking for the right classroom, when some students recognized us — not as individuals, naturally, but as foreigners, likely Americans, possibly the writers they'd been told would be arriving that day. They'd been looking forward to our lecture. They led us to the right building and into a classroom, where we found a handful of students waiting patiently. Everything about

A Dip in the Cold

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to the Bering Sea. On August 30, 1906, he passed through the Bering Strait. The *Gjøa* and its crew had made it through the Northwest Passage. Amundsen caught sight of the Diomed Islands, and, just when it seemed that the *Gjøa* had entered calmer water, the ship was hit by a squall and its gaff broke again. Then a dead calm set in, and the *Gjøa* sailed slowly into Nome, Alaska. Amundsen wrote:

Suddenly a steam launch appeared in front of us, and we heard whistling, shouting, and cheering, the Americans' mode of expressing enthusiasm. Dark as it was, we could still discern the Norwegian flag floating side by side with the Stars and Stripes on the launch. So we had been recognised . . . The heartiness with which we were welcomed, the unbounded enthusiasm of which the "*Gjøa*" was the object, will always remain one of my brightest memories of our return . . . The boat touched land. I really cannot say how I got ashore, but a jubilant roar of welcome issued from a thousand throats, and through the darkness of the night a sound burst forth that thrilled me through and through, bringing tears to my eyes; it was the strains of our national air.

As I climbed out of the Chukchi Sea, I felt a sense of elation. These weeks in Greenland, Canada, and Alaska had taken me into waters that few had entered or ever swum. I had traveled through the same Arctic world as Amundsen had, a place where one misstep could mean disaster. And at the same time I felt as though I was exploring a different place. I thought of the frozen waterways that were now opening up to exploration. They were so tempting, but first I needed to turn south, as Amundsen had.

technique works
to flip between Amundsen's
story and narrator's story
so he follows him almost
completely?

Appendix B: Research on Anxiety

Prior to my semester abroad, I did research on the different types and causes of anxiety, anxiety while traveling, and anxiety about studying abroad. Below is one sample of an article about the differences in brain structure between adolescents with and without Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY 30:842–848 (2013)

Research Article

NEUROANATOMIC ABNORMALITIES IN ADOLESCENTS WITH GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER: A VOXEL-BASED MORPHOMETRY STUDY

Jeffrey R. Strawn, M.D.,^{1,*} Anna M. Wehry, B.S.,¹ Wen-Jang Chu, Ph.D.,^{1,2}
Caleb M. Adler, M.D.,^{1,2} James C. Eliassen, Ph.D.,^{1,2} Michael A. Cerullo, M.D.,¹
Stephen M. Strakowski, M.D.,^{1,2} and Melissa P. DelBello, M.D., M.S.¹

Background: Despite recent data implicating functional abnormalities in the neurocircuitry underlying emotional processing in pediatric anxiety disorders, little is known regarding neurostructural abnormalities within these systems. **Methods:** Using voxel-based morphometry, gray and white matter volumes were compared in 15 medication-free adolescents with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD; and no comorbid major depressive disorder) and 28 age- and sex-matched healthy comparison subjects. **Results:** Compared to healthy adolescents, youth with GAD had larger gray matter volumes in the right precuneus and right precentral gyrus and decreased gray matter volumes in the left orbital gyrus and posterior cingulate. White matter volumes were decreased in the left medial and superior frontal gyrus and were increased in the left inferior temporal gyrus in youth with GAD relative to healthy subjects. **Conclusions:** Adolescents with GAD, who are early in the course of their illness, exhibit abnormalities in neural structures that subserve threat appraisal, modulation of fear responses, attachment, and mentalization. *Depression and Anxiety* 30:842–848, 2013. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

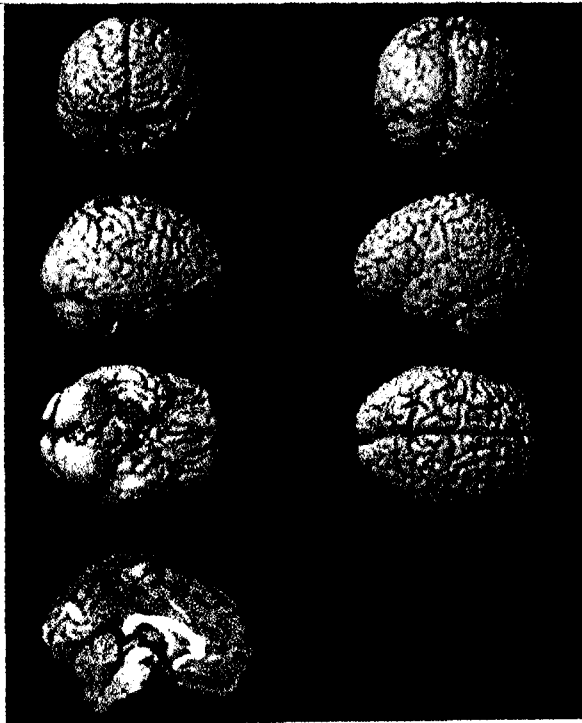


Figure 1. Map of regions in which gray matter volumes are increased in adolescents with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) compared to healthy comparison subjects ($P < .001$, cluster size: 200 voxels). The right pre- and postcentral gyri are depicted in a three-dimensional view and the precuneus is shown sagittally.

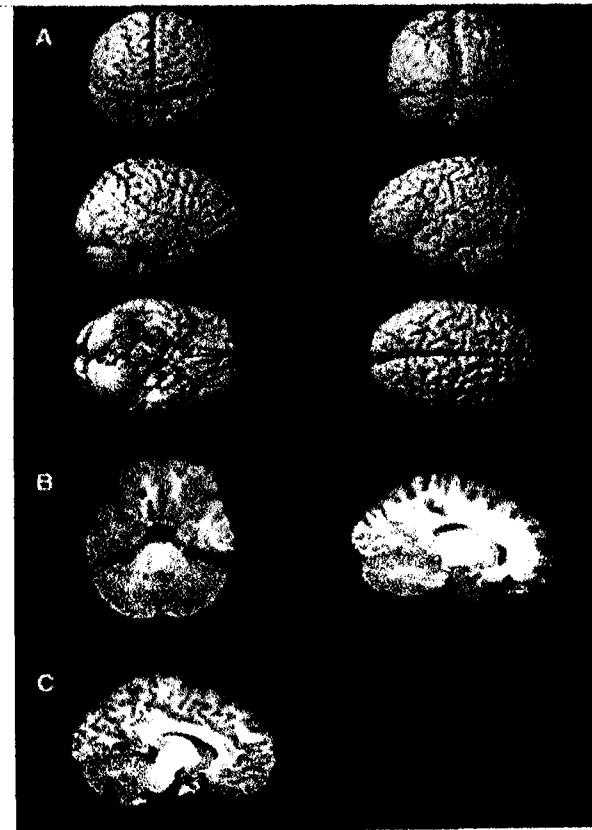


Figure 2. Map of regions in which gray matter volumes are decreased in adolescents with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) compared to healthy comparison subjects ($P < 0.001$, cluster size:

Appendix C: Blog Posts

I wrote ten posts throughout the semester about my adventures. With each post, I chose a theme for a lesson I had learned and I gave a basic summary of what I was up to. My main purpose in doing this was to encourage reflective thinking and to keep my family and friends up-to-date.

Lesson #5: London is a lot of city for one person.

February 14th

Hello, it's me!

Channeling my inner Adele for this post haha. Believe it or not, I have heard that she lives around my campus! I am determined to do some searching. I will let you know if I have any luck.

This Thursday the 11th marked a whole month since I have been in London! I cannot believe how quickly it went! The 11th was also my brother's 18th birthday! Too bad I was not home to celebrate with him. Or should I say, too bad he was not here to celebrate?

This past week has probably been my best week so far here. I am finally getting into a routine of running and knowing my class and eating schedules.

A quick run-through of the week:

Monday: a normal day with classes and my morning run through Hyde Park! I visited the district of Brixton for a Photojournalism project. I am still in awe of how many outdoor markets there are, with fresh fruits and vegetables and fish.

Tuesday: I ventured alone (sorry Mom, all of my friends were in class), to the Apple Store to repair my computer. I was so proud to figure out the tube system by myself, and return in one piece! The Apple Store was in a huge mall. I plan to return for some shopping for sure!

I went to the Holocaust Exhibit at the Imperial War Museum with two friends. No matter how many things I read or see about World War II and the Holocaust, I will always be humbled and shocked and upset by the facts I learn. The museum did a really nice job with the exhibit if you ever get the chance to visit.

Wednesday: My favorite class, Travel Writing, was cancelled. I did not know what to do with all of my free time! Believe it or not, having free time sometimes stresses me out more than having a full plate does. I think of all the things I could be doing with my free time. My dad calls it “spinning my wheels” because I am just thinking about what to do next instead of actually accomplishing anything. Like any typical college student, I used my free time to take a nap! Since I have been in London, I have not really been all that tired. I wake up almost every morning, no matter how much sleep I get, energized and ready to take on the day! The feeling is hard to describe. It as if the city invigorates me!

Thursday: A day off, but I honestly cannot remember what I did. Too much excitement the rest of the week to report on!

Friday: After class, I discovered a Pound World and Pound Land. Just like the Dollar Store, but with a different currency. I went with a friend to the National Portrait Gallery. One fun fact I found was that Winston Churchill was a writer and an artist. He enjoyed doing those things in his spare time. I try to remember one thing from every museum I visit. London has so many museums! It is a bit daunting. I find myself getting to the point where the paintings blend together and I cannot remember what floor I am on or which museum I am in haha. I call it aesthetic overload!

Saturday: I took a bus to Oxford with some friends! Did you know that Oxford University has 38 colleges? And they are spread out throughout the city. I felt smarter just being in the presence of Oxford students! We took a tour of the Bodleian Library, where parts of the Harry Potter series were filmed! The library was so old but so cool! There are about 20 million books there, filling the shelves from floor-to-ceiling. I love libraries, and this one is definitely among my favorites. The library tour was definitely one of my top three experiences abroad so far. We were not allowed to take pictures, which forced me to take in the surroundings and listen intently to the tour guide. I think restricted photography made the tour better!

Sunday: The Chinese New Year Festival! There was a short parade at 10am, full of dragons, floats, and kids in school programs. We went to Chinatown to eat, and it was one of the busiest streets I have ever seen! Packed with people watching street performances, and nobody could move. They had stage performers in Trafalgar Square too. There was a lot going on to ring in the Year of the Monkey!

Thank you all for keeping up with me every week. I am feeling much better about being in London. As I am getting adjusted to my surroundings and new schedule and distance from home, I do not feel as anxious. I am slowly starting to realize that London is too big of a city for one person to handle. What I mean by that is that there is no possible way I can explore all of it. Even a span of four months is not enough

time! So I must explore what I can. I try to do something new every day. It is a good goal, but sometimes it is more of a checklist than a chance to actually enjoy everything new.

Appendix D: Journal Entries

Nearly every day, I kept a personal journal about my day. I included specific details about my travels, who I was with, and the emotions I had at the time. Below is a recreated entry. I wrote all of my original entries in cursive, and I wanted this recreation to be as similar to the original as I could make it.

Thursday, February 18th, 2016

Dear Journal,

I am currently on the train to Scotland. I don't know how much longer I have, so it might be a quick entry.

I was listening to music with my eyes closed, and when I opened them, the first thing I saw was water. THE OCEAN! It made me feel like I was home. I was so happy.

I think I've decided that trains are my favorite mode of transportation. No pressure of being in the air. We don't have to worry about crashing into any cars. So far, the country side has been really green. I am experiencing my first hostel tonight! We will see how that goes.

I don't really know what to expect in Scotland, but I am excited. And I finally got my trailer done. It took me almost six hours. It really isn't that great, but whatever.

"It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters, in the end." -Ernest Hemingway

That's a quote that came in this journal. Hemingway's right. I can't reflect on the experience until it happens. I can't always look at the end product. I have to be there for the journey.