

WHAT YOU LEAVE BEHIND:
A COLLECTION OF TRAVEL ESSAYS

by

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ABSTRACT

What You Leave Behind is a collection of essays framed by the theme of travel. The essays seek to understand the changeability and the consistency of the self when exposed to new cultures and new environments. They also explore what travel tells us about varying world perspectives, and how much of those varying world perspectives people can hope to understand. Lastly, these true-life stories and ruminations explore how travel shapes relationships: familial, romantic, and platonic. At its core, this thesis strives to reveal how traveling can inform the way people understand themselves, the world around them, and the relationships they have with others, both at home and abroad.

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I. CAMBRIDGE

WHAT YOU LEAVE BEHIND

I was in high school, and my grandmother barreled down the road.

“Grandma!” She skidded over a median in the street.

“Honey, you’re a teenager. Live a little.” She was supposed to take me thrift store shopping, but I began to doubt we’d ever reach our destination. I held my breath as she drove in the opposite direction of traffic, using the turning lane as a regular lane.

“Grandma, you know that you’re going in the wrong direction, don’t you?”

She flipped a bird out the window at a passing honker and shook her head. “The road’s a road, dear.” I wondered if she drove so recklessly because she was old, if she didn’t care if she died sooner or later. “Now what were you telling me, honey?”

“About that *Nanny 911* show. You should see those kids. They’re so annoying.”

My grandmother shook her head and sighed as she veered into the right lane without checking if it was clear. A car swerved out of the way and onto the shoulder. “You know, when your mother was little, a woman in our neighborhood drowned her two kids in the bathtub.”

“Oh my God.”

“I know. They were young. Elementary school, maybe?” She sped through a red light and placed a cold hand on my arm. “But Maddy . . .”

“Uh huh.”

Picking up speed, her purple Eclipse raced down the black road.

“I understood.”

I stopped watching the death trap out the window and snapped my head around to see if she was serious. Her mouth gave no hint of a smile, and her eyes were calm and focused. It was

the first time I ever understood that my grandmother was not simply the crazy and exciting woman she presented herself to be. There was a darker side. A part of her she'd hidden from me.

After that joy ride, I thought my grandmother had it in her mind that men, marriage, and babies were the plagues every woman wanted to avoid. I thought it a mercy she didn't drown my mother and my two aunts. Amazingly, she let them live, and sent them away to school, and then off to marriage. When she found out I had a boyfriend while I was far away getting a degree she was paying for, she called to make sure I wasn't dropping out of school. Apparently, one can either have romance or ambition, not both at the same time. Even my parents phoned me in a slight state of panic. I told them that as strange as it may seem, girls have boyfriends and go to class all at the same time. In fact, there are thousands of girls like that—millions. It took them a while to believe me.

The first time I hung out with my now boyfriend, Dusty, we caravanned to a “rock star/porn star party” that a somewhat distant friend of mine was throwing. Dusty brought a car full of boys, and I came equipped with my roommates. As soon as we walked in, I felt uncomfortable. On a regular night, my two roommates and I either hung out at a coffee shop or drank at home and played UNO until the sun came up. We were the only girls not dressed in lingerie—my Eddie Vedder costume not a popular choice. I exchanged glances with my girls.

“Want to grab a twenty-four pack and head to my place for some games instead?” I asked Dusty. Dusty, conveniently, had two friends with him as well, perfect for making our own little party.

His tight smile relaxed. “Definitely.” Evidently, this was not his scene either.

Back at the house, we brought out Apples to Apples, a game during which I am a furious debater. After I engaged in an especially heated argument with Dusty’s friend, Dusty (the judge of the round) chose my card as the winner.

“You’re not trying to win the game.” His friend threw his card back on the table. “You’re trying to win the girl.”

Dusty blushed, and that’s when I knew the attraction was reciprocated. Despite this fact, I maintain I won that round due to my extraordinary debating skills.

Once, my grandmother saw a sheer black string thong with tasteless rhinestones I’d recently purchased at Macy’s. I was in high school, a place where nobody wore regular underwear. How absolutely embarrassing that would be. My grandmother picked it up by its string side and turned to my mother, “We’ve got to keep this girl off her back.”

At the time, I was actually so sexually inexperienced I hadn’t understood the remark until much later in the day, after hours of thinking about it and trying to dissect it. I looked at thongs more along the lines of a private fashion statement than as sex clothes—and if one of the rhinestoned strings happened to peek out of my pants by accident, then I would be safe from that granny panties mocking I heard some of the other girls endure.

My grandmother, though, knew a little more about sex in her day than I did in mine. She later told me that she and my Papa “almost made it” in the back of his boxy clunk of a car (the car he shared with his three other siblings). They were necking real good and Nat King Cole was on the radio—her absolute favorite singer, and later her absolute favorite love-making music (a

fact I deeply regret being privy to). The windows were getting steamy. The seats stuck to the back of her arms. Papa had his hands in her hair. It was definitely going down. Until.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Her own mother stared at her through the fog, making sure her daughter kept off her back.

Of course, I eventually did make it on my back and learned many other positions as well. When Dusty and I began sleeping together, it was like living in a warm, little story book. We were painted on the paper with plenty of skin and smiles. On this page there was no thought of the future.

“Pssst, Madison.” I felt someone nudge my arm and squinted through my crusty eyelids at a blurry Dusty.

“Mmm, morning,” I murmured as I groped the side table for my glasses.

“I have some chocolate coffee for you,” Dusty said as he held the brim of the cup under my nose, as if the mere scent would send caffeine to my brain.

I sat up in bed and propped the pillows, so I could sit in a sort of half-lying down way. I took the coffee from his hand and beckoned for him to nestle up to me. He crawled into bed, and we sipped from the same cup.

“Why are you up so early? You got work?” I asked. Dusty, at that point, was a clerk at a textbook store, but really he was a musician, just like I was a student, but really a writer.

“Yeah, in like forty-five minutes.” He stretched his arm over my shoulders. I liked the way his arm felt; I liked the feeling of skin against skin. I rubbed my foot up and down his leg.

“Put the coffee on the end table,” I said and threw the covers over us, wanting to taste his morning breath.

Afterward, I lay my head on his shoulder, winding his chest hair through my fingers.

“Crap!” Dusty sat up in bed, looking at his watch. “I’ve got to be at work in six minutes.” The store was a five-minute walk away. Sometimes he could get there in three if he scaled a wall, which he normally did back then when I held him up.

“No, don’t leave. Let’s press pause. We can do that, right? Just press pause, and you can stay here, and we never have to move.”

“Okay, I’ll stay here,” he said and relaxed his shoulders. He ran his fingers up and down my spine. For a moment, we lay there, pause button pressed, but it caught up with us. “Damn it, no. I’ve got to go. I’m going to get fired if I’m late again.” He kissed my head and jumped out of bed. “I swear you’re the devil,” he said, throwing on a shirt.

I caught sight of the clock. “Yikes, you’ve only got four minutes!” He waved goodbye and hopped out the door, slinging his shoes over his feet. “Run baby run!” I called, and he sprinted down the stairs to scale the wall.

He would be back at my house in a few hours, I knew. If I did my homework now, I could devote the rest of my night to him. I clung the bed sheet around me and hobbled over to my computer. Before I opened a Word document, I went to the Alias Punch Myspace page—the band Dusty performed bass and vocals for—so I could hear his voice while I worked on my essay. The music came out scratchy through the computer’s crappy speakers, but I closed my eyes and listened anyway. When he came back, I knew he would lift me up in a kiss, and we would tumble back into bed, pretending he never left at all.

My grandmother was not so much afraid of the sex, but afraid of what that might lead to. She got a lot of joy out of us kids: letting my boy cousins hold onto the car's hood for dear life as she drove (just like in the movies), letting me smash plates in her driveway for good luck in the new year, setting up elaborate Christmas present scavenger hunts for my mom and my aunts. But becoming a mother at age nineteen had taken away a deep part of her. My grandmother often told me about running away from her children. Sometimes I like to wonder about who she was in those days, when she wasn't yet Grandma, but Terry. Maybe it would look something like this:

Three high pitched voices would follow Terry, this future grandmother of mine, as she ran with her nail polish toward the bathroom.

"Mom, she's a *liar!*" Penny, my future mother, would shout, pulling her younger sister backwards by her curled black hair.

"No, I am not!" Valli would insist, wrenching herself free.

Wendy racing behind, fighting to keep up. "Tattle tale!"

"Dimwit!" Valli would say over her shoulder.

"Mom! She called me a dimwit!"

"Did not!"

I can see my mother, Penny, grabbing hold of Valli again. "Mom! I told you she's a liar!"

"Mommy!"

"Are you listening?"

"Mom!"

Terry would turn around and swat the air behind her. “I am not Mom. I am not Mommy. I am not Mother. I have changed my name, and I’m not telling you what it is. Now leave me alone.” She would walk again, hoping that was the end of it, but her daughters would follow, still close behind.

“But Mom,” Valli would insist with pursed lips.

“Not my name.”

“Well, what is your name?” Penny would smirk.

“Not telling.”

“Mom! Mommy! Mom!” A screeching Wendy would tug at her mother’s skirt.

Terry would pick up her pace, the little ankle biters right behind her. The room closing in. She’d brake into a run. The bathroom so close. She could make it.

“Mom! Mom!”

“Mommy, stop running!”

She’d lose them shooting around the corner into the hallway. The bathroom door slightly ajar, inviting her in. Her heels clacking against the tile. Her arms would stretch in the direction of the haven. Sucking in her breath, she’d take one final leap to safety. A slammed door. Her shaky hands turning the lock. Instantly, fists pounding on the other side of the door, whines seeping through the bottom crack.

“What are you doing, Mom?”

“Come out! I need you!”

“MOM!”

Terry would stand with her back against the door, blinking in the fluorescent light. She'd let herself slide down to the floor and wait for the screaming and calling to cease. I can see her, only twenty-one, holding her knees, counting:

One Mississippi

Two Mississippi

Three Mississippi . . .

By the time she would reach three hundred or so, the noise would have stopped, and she'd stand up, wringing her hands. Her thin fingers turning the knob of the faucet, ice-cold water pouring out. She'd splash it on her painted face, letting the cold shock her back into existence before patting dry with the hand towel. I imagine her looking in the mirror.

You are Terry. Terry likes to decorate for holidays. Terry likes to wink at men. Terry likes fast cars. Terry likes tight clothes. Terry likes desserts.

She would pick at her wavy hair, all knotted up after a day of shouting at children, and smooth out her blouse.

You are more than PTA. You are more than the driver. You are more than the peacekeeper. You are more than Mom. You are Terry.

But then a knock on the door. "Mom?"

"I don't know anyone by that name."

Again the voices would seep through the cracks, but I see Terry, my future grandmother, run the water in the sink to drown them out. I see her sitting on the toilet seat and, after a few deep breaths, calmly painting her nails candy apple red.

Terry. Terry. You are Terry.

And yet, no matter how much she told me she dreaded having become “Mom” instead of “Terry,” it seemed like my grandfather, Papa, allowed her to be herself, even if her daughters didn’t. She used to love vacations with her husband, leaving the runts behind. “It was like I became me again. I remembered who I was before it all.”

Even though she sometimes saw my boyfriends only as future husbands and husbands only as future families, she felt obligated to teach me how a companion should act, so that I might snag and keep a good man who would let me be myself as well.

One Thanksgiving, about a year into my relationship with Dusty, I sat with my grandmother (clad in her favorite sequined vest) at my aunt’s living room bar. Dusty and I took our holidays separately—he with his family in Central Florida, and me with mine in South Florida. My grandma rooted about in my personal life, and I made it easy for her, spouting off answers in between fruity shots that my cousin, our designated holiday bartender, poured me. My grandma always was one to push us toward adventures, so her granddaughter doing a few shots didn’t phase her one bit. She liked to drink herself, and didn’t see any reason why I should have to forgo that indulgence.

“So, how’s the man?” she asked, an eyebrow playfully cocked.

I waved loose fingers and downed the tiny cup in front of me. “Dusty’s a good boy. Couple nights ago, he brought me home a Reese’s to ease my homework stress.” I pointed my finger up, signaling for my cousin to pour me another.

My grandmother nodded her head. “That was sweet . . . and what do you do for him?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Some nice things I’m sure.”

“Hmm.” She looked me over and cleared her throat. “Maddy, I was watching this show and do you know what it said?”

I took the second shot and savored the sour sweetness of the green apple mixer. “What did it say?”

“It said that the main reason men take mistresses isn’t because they’re pretty, and it isn’t because of the sex. It’s ‘cause of the way the mistresses make the men feel. Like good about themselves, you know? Special.”

I threw my arm around her and offered her my next drink. “I’m sure he feels okay,” I said, putting my head on her padded shoulder.

“Really, Maddy, you’d better treat him good. Things happen.”

“Oh, Grandma, he knows I love him,” I mumbled. “He knows.”

And he did know. He did, a few times, tell me that I had to stop treating him like a slave, that perhaps I should not be so demanding, but on the whole I think I made him happy. I made props for his rock shows. I read his screenplay. I introduced him to the wonders of bagels and cream cheese.

There were times, though, when he felt second-fiddle to my ambition. I did believe one could have both, but I also believed one needed to come first, and succeeding was my number one. This was especially evident in the weeks before my month-and-a-half-long study abroad trip to the University of Cambridge in England.

Dusty and I had been together for two years now. We lived in the same bedroom, but shared our home with roommates. I sat at the long, wooden arts and crafts table in the play room.

I had a computer in front of me, five open books scattered around me, droopy eyes, and a headache. I shoveled seventeenth century feminist ideology from the open books into my mind and out onto the computer screen. I produced a mishmash of slop. I shoveled and shoveled, hoping to strike gold eventually.

The sun shined through the glass doors that led to the backyard. I glanced over at the overgrown green grass and the cerulean sky. I put my head in my hand and turned to the jumbled craft box teetering on the chest of drawers across from me. The Crayola box, where I learned the color cerulean, beckoned me. I slammed my fist on the table and dragged one of the books over my lap to read. The one downfall of this study abroad was the amount of work they assigned ahead of time. My homework list consisted of twenty-six books (mostly plays and Victorian novels) and two research papers. I felt trapped in words and research. *Just a few more months. A few more months and I will be in lovely old England*, I thought, egging myself on.

“How’s it going, Lady Face?” Dusty asked. He walked over to me slowly from the kitchen, blowing on the steaming mug in his hands. “I brought you a present.”

“For me!” For a second, my heart lifted as he handed me the mug, warm against my palms.

“I put chocolate in it,” he said. “To cheer you up.”

I took a tentative sip, trying not to burn my tongue. It was rich and the perfect treat for me in this desperate hour, exactly what I needed to keep myself going. “You know me so well,” I said, and tilted my head back for a kiss.

“So, I bought a bottle of wine for our date tonight.” He took a seat on the bench next to me.

Fuck. I'd totally forgotten. There was no way I could go to the docks that night. I'd be writing well into the witching hour. I bit my lip. We always went to the docks when we felt we hadn't connected in a while. There was something about sitting on planks of wood, staring out onto a moon-lit lake, that made you want to spill your guts. I looked up at his hopeful eyes. "I don't know if I'll be done, and this paper really has to be written like yesterday. I can't put it off. I just got to hunker down, you know? It's important."

His shoulders drooped. "Yeah, yeah. Just do what you got to do." He stood up in a hurry and let a layer of hair fall in front of his eyes. "Just, Maddy?"

"Yeah?"

"Next time we plan a date, make sure you can do it, alright? This is the third time."

"I know. I'm so sorry," I said, but he was already walking toward our bedroom. He slammed the door.

I wanted to follow him, to kiss him, to down that whole bottle of wine, and block out all the Victorian literature and research I'd just shoved into my brain. I didn't want to sit there writing a paper, but I wanted to go to England, and I wanted to be prepared.

When my grandmother was in high school, she thought you had to decide between having a man and following personal dreams. The scholarship she turned down to get married is a legendary story among her daughters. We—her daughters and their daughters—all know that was her greatest regret, and if she could do it over again, she would be an accountant, and we would not be here.

My grandmother, as the story goes, sat at the front of her math class senior year of high school, small diamond stud on her ring finger. She shuffled her papers into her folder and closed her textbook. The bell rang, and she tucked a tuft of black hair behind her ear as she stood to go. She has recalled this moment to me countless times.

“Not so fast, Terry,” her math teacher said before she could walk out of the door to meet her fiancé in the parking lot. “There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

She sighed at the door to freedom and took a step back into the classroom. “Yes?” she asked as she approached her teacher’s large oak desk.

“You’re my top student,” he said, tapping his pen against the desktop. “You know that, don’t you?”

She blushed, never very good with compliments, or conversing regularly for that matter. “Well, I did know that I was in the running,” she said, staring at the ground.

“I applied for a scholarship in your favor. It was granted. I think you ought to take it.”

My grandmother looked up at him, unable to speak. She’d often thought about becoming an accountant. She liked number problems. They were easy. There was always an answer. More importantly, when she was doing math, she didn’t have to talk to anyone. She could be at ease with herself. “I,” she stammered, “I don’t know anyone who’s going to college.” All her friends were either going to work, getting married, or both. It was the fifties, and her neighborhood wasn’t filled with the class of people who went to universities.

“Well, the offer’s on the table, and I really think you ought to consider it. I know you could do great things in the field.”

“Thank you, sir,” my grandmother said, her eyes back on the ground.

“That’s all. Let me know what you decide.”

She nodded her head and spun out the doorway, arms hugging her books to her chest. She wondered if she really had the guts to go to college. She took off into a run toward the parking lot—toward Papa and his beat up little car and everything she’d known of the world so far.

She once told me that if she’d only known someone else doing it too, she would have gone. But that was uncharted territory, and she was afraid to be the first to take a step.

I, on the other hand, had known someone who took that step before me. She was vice president of the English Honors Society at my university. She came back alive and grinning, and I thought, *If she can do that, well so can I*. I would do whatever crazy amount of work they wanted of me if I could just catch that plane to England. Cambridge began to be the only thing I could see. I envisioned myself carrying large books down cobblestone roads, sizable stone buildings resembling castles flanking either side of me. I’d sit in an old classroom (hundreds of years old, I imagined) and my professor—certainly a doctor—would recite classic literature while I sat with rapt attention, following his fervent yet polished voice. I thought of myself walking the same gardens as Thackeray, Woolf, and Plath—relaxing by the very same river as Coleridge and Wordsworth, Marlowe and Milton, and Byron and Tennyson. I’d gaze up at the same stars in the very same park as Darwin, Newton, and Hawking. I saw myself carousing with ghosts and greats in an old yet optimistically green land. These thoughts carried through my mind day and night, gradually shoving Dusty aside—until he saw fit to remind me of him.

After a long day of reading *Vanity Fair*, I stood under the shower head letting the warm water blast down onto my face and shoulders. Dusty already finished washing and stood outside of the foggy glass door, drying himself off. I was silent and pondering what structure to use for the second research paper I would begin tomorrow.

“It’s not fucking fair,” Dusty called through the steam, breaking my organized thoughts.

“What isn’t?” I searched through shampoo-coated eyes for my loofa.

I heard our closet door slam and then, “You’re leaving, and I’m supposed to be all okay with it. Go ahead, follow your dreams, all that shit, but you know what? You’re abandoning me, without a second thought to how I might feel. You don’t even fucking care.”

I squirted soap onto my loofa and shouted over the running water. “You are not allowed to give me crap about anything school related.”

I saw his blurry figure approach the glass. “Look, I don’t want to hold you back. I don’t want to be that guy that you loathe in twenty years because I stopped you from having these great experiences. Believe me,” he said.

I stayed silent, running the loofa over my body.

“But you don’t even give me a second thought. You brush all our dates to the side. You read even during dinner. You might as well already be in England.”

I cracked the door open to look at him and some of the water flooded at my feet spilled out onto the clean tiled floor. “I know. I’ve been busy, but it’s even harder for me right now. I’m the one drowning with work.”

He buttoned his jeans and stared at me. “No it’s not, because soon you’ll be far away in another country. You’ll be chatting it up with blond guys with accents, or maybe not even. But

I'll be here, with no way to get ahold of you aside from Facebook, and you know, it's like the thinnest tether," he said, strapping a belt around his waist.

I closed the door again and rinsed off my hair and body as quickly as possible. I shouted through the falling water, "I promise I'll write you all the time and send you pictures and stuff. But you have to be good about that too, okay? You can't be mister elusive like you usually are."

"Please, you'll be running around Cambridge all day," he said as I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. "You barely have time for me here. Do you really think you're going to have time for me over there?"

He handed me my towel. I held it loosely around my shoulders. "I'll make time, baby. I promise. And I promise to set aside a couple days for you before I go, so we can remember what being together is really like."

He pulled me into him, and I soaked his collared shirt. "I'm afraid that you're going to forget what it's like to be with me, and there's nothing I can do about it because I'm expected to just shut up and be the supportive boyfriend." He stroked my dripping hair. "It's hard. I have to watch you walk away with a smile on my face."

I reached my arms around his torso, and my towel dipped down to my waist. "I won't forget you," I whispered and held him tightly.

In the summer of 1950, my grandmother was on the verge of making a decision. David, my future Papa, presented her with a vanity set, a silver mirror and comb. "It's for your hope chest," he said. "For when we're married." In my mind, my grandmother looked at him thrilled at the set, but at the same time, carefully weighing her options. She was cute, she knew that—at

least moderately pretty. Later, she would tell me that her best looking years didn't come until she reached the ripe old age of twenty-eight. David, though, he was what all the girls dreamed about. She was sure that she loved him more than he loved her.

She grasped the mirror with her red-painted fingernails and took a look at her made-up face, her black-lined eyes, her coral lips. Was this a face of a scholar? Was this the face of an accountant? Was it a face of a wife? She didn't talk to David about the scholarship, didn't know what his mind was like on the subject (it was a decision for her to make, not him), but she doubted she could keep his interest from a distance. She was surprised she could keep it living only blocks away.

“Will you love me forever?” she asked him, holding out her hand for the comb.

“Forever,” he said, passing it over. But she had doubts, not only about the limits of his love, but also her ability to go away by herself. Was she chasing the life of an accountant or a lonely old maid, she wondered.

I did not want to be a lonely old maid, but I didn't want to be married and chained either. I thought I could find my solution in food and sex. In the last days, if I worked really hard to show Dusty what a wonderful girlfriend I could be, then that memory would surely stick with him—even during his remarkable whiskey nights—until I came back.

I was in the kitchen waiting for Dusty to get out of work. He was closing with Gabby tonight and probably wouldn't be home until a little past midnight. Since he went into work at five, and neither of us were hungry at that point, we usually had dinner when he got out. I sometimes tried my hand in the kitchen, but truth be told, I wasn't the cook of the couple. I hated

the thought of him alone with his coworker, Gabby, though. Lately, she'd been coming out to his band's shows and sending him text messages that made him giggle. Plus, he had told me recently that this Gabby who "only got hired because she's really hot" had some kind of "special connection" with him that was "so rare, you know?" So, I was out to prove that I was better.

Too bad I was a klutz in the kitchen. Thank God, couscous was easy, but I'd already sliced my finger chopping up peppers. Now I sat on a bar stool, one pointer bandaged, skewering peppers, onions, and sliced sausages onto a wooden stick. I had to call a friend to find out if I was supposed to remove the sausage casing or not. Apparently, you leave it on. After I speared the last bell pepper, I cranked up the George Forman and laid them on the fat-reducing grill. *I wish we had a real one*, I mused, but immediately followed with, *If we did, I wouldn't know how to use it*. There was nothing to do now, but wait. I sat on the stool and watched the white, frothy fat drip into the dish below it. The fat was disgusting, and I decided I liked the George Forman better than a real grill after all.

The front door squeaked open, and Dusty poked his shaggy head through the walkway. "Smells good in here. Are you actually cooking something?" he asked, raising his long eyebrows at me.

"Yes, I am." I jumped off the stool and kissed his prickly face when he stepped into the kitchen.

"Wow, and no firemen were called in?" he asked, his eyes wide with mock astonishment.

"Oh, they were here, but not for a kitchen fire. They just came to visit me."

He kissed my neck as I ladled out the toasted pine nut couscous. I placed four skewers on a plate and arranged them fan-style over the grain.

“How fancy of you,” he said, taking the plate from me. We sat on the floor and ate off of the living room coffee table, laughing at an episode of *Arrested Development*. The food tasted normal, thank God. When we finished, I took Dusty’s plate to the dishwasher and asked him to put on a movie.

“It’s late,” I said, “but let’s do it anyway.” He pulled one out and powered up the living room DVD player. “No!” I shouted, and then recovered. “I want to watch it in the bedroom, so we can cuddle and stuff. You know, away from roommates.” He shrugged and moved into our darkened room. I followed him in, but headed straight toward our attached restroom. “I’ll be right out.”

Once in that brightly lit, gorgeously huge bathroom, I whipped out the bag I’d stashed under the kitchen sink. In it there were fishnets, a black lace corset (with attached garter belt), a string thong, and heels. I took off my clothes and sat on the edge of our Whirlpool tub (something I hoped we’d use later in the night). Slowly, I pulled up my thigh-highs one at a time. Fortunately, I had a lot of experience with stockings during my baton twirling years, so I ran into no blunders. I pulled the corset over my head and stood in front of the mirror. I’d paled horribly since moving from South Florida to Orlando. My white skin set off the black in an unsettling way. I turned my back to the mirror and shimmied the string thong up to my hips. Now for the last and most difficult step, attaching the garter belt to the stockings. I always had trouble with this part. I yanked the garter attachment over one enormous butt-cheek and tried desperately to clasp it as my shoulder rolled unnaturally outward. *Snap*.

“Shit!” I whispered, and tried to twist the corset around so I could fix whatever the hell went wrong. Lingerie could be fun if it wasn’t for the damn set-up.

“What in the heck are you doing in there?” Dusty called from behind the door. “I’m falling asleep.”

“No! Don’t!” I snapped the damn dangle thing back into place. “I’ll be out soon, I promise.” I twisted the corset around and began again. This time all the right things connected. I squirmed into my half-a-size-too-small stiletto heels and surveyed myself in the mirror. *Not bad for a pale chick*, I thought, *but something’s missing*. I’d forgotten makeup. I needed to hurry. I worried I’d lose him to sleep, and maybe to something else. I pulled open my makeup drawer and streaked on some charcoal eye shadow, following it with a stream of thick liquid eye-liner. I winged the edges like cat eyes.

“I’m so sleepy.”

“Hold on.” I washed some shimmery red lipstick over my mouth and tried to strike a somewhat sexy pose in the mirror, shoulders back, butt out. *You look stupid*, I told myself, but I opened the door anyway.

“Damn,” Dusty said as I walked out from the bright bathroom light into the dark bedroom. “You’re like a gingerbread cookie. So yummy, but such a shame to unwrap.” He placed one hand on the small of my back, and the other he ran through my hair. He took a step toward me, hand pulling my waist into him. I felt less stupid. He bent down to kiss me.

My grandmother paid close attention to astrology and read Dusty and my relationship signs. We were horribly suited for each other. The horoscope put our success rate at about 30%, with a 70% failure rate. We were not looking good. The first time my grandmother met Dusty,

she decided to tip the scales in the wrong direction just a little further. She thought it might be fun to “freak the kid out.”

Dusty and I were playing pool in my aunt’s game room when my grandmother walked up in her smart black slacks and shiny green blouse. Dusty was beating me by three balls, but I had faith that I would swoop in at the end.

She set herself beside him and watched me miss another pocket. “So, Dusty, is my granddaughter easy?” she asked, leaning against the dark wood table.

Dusty fumbled with his stick. “She’s easy to beat at pool.” My grandmother turned to walk away, dragging her finger across his shoulders.

She tossed her head to the side. “Good to know, kid.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s okay, babe. At least she spared you her Application to Date My Granddaughter.” Really, he didn’t know that my grandmother talking to him and wearing green meant that she liked him. When I brought home my first boyfriend, instead of quizzing him herself, she made a list of questions for my aunt to ask. Also, she wore all black. Though Dusty didn’t know it, he was doing alright in her book.

It was our last night in our home together before I left for Cambridge. I finished packing the day before, so I could make it an evening dedicated to Dusty. We bought a double bottle of wine, one of those 1.5 liter monstrosities, and decided that tonight, tonight we would use glasses instead of drinking straight from the bottle—our last hours alone together brimming with class. He handed me my wine and sat down next to me on our cloud of a bed. A month could seem so trivial sometimes, so small. It was silly to be as sad as we were. But, when you spend every

single day with someone, breathe in each other at night, wake up to caresses every morning, with every meal spent in the other's company, every day met with a kiss on the shoulder and a squeeze of the waist, then a month is not a short time at all. I was embarking on a month and a half long adventure without half of myself.

I recorded his thick eyebrows, his pinkish-yellow hue, his long lashes. I felt his soft hair, his square jaw, his broad shoulders, his thin torso. Likewise, his hands slid down my body, filing away the memory. He leaned into me, grasping the back of my neck with his guitar-calloused fingers, kissing me with all his will for me to stay, and right then, as I felt his lips press up against mine, I wished I could.

In the morning, the sun was bright and beckoning. Dusty grunted as he loaded my mammoth bags into the car, one filled with twenty-six books and the other with forty-five days' worth of clothing. We were driving down to my parents' house in South Florida, where I would leave the next day out of the Miami airport, and he would drive back up to whittle away the days without me. On the ride, Dusty kept his hand on my knee, and I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder, taking in the Pantene Pro-V scent of his hair, wondering what life would be like in Cambridge and what it might be like when I returned. As I watched the road flash by, I thought of my grandmother, the crusader of my education, the patron of my studies. I wondered what I might be sacrificing—and what I might be gaining.

PROCESS OF ELIMINATION

Rocks from the cracked sidewalk shifted under my feet as we hoofed it from our St. Catherine's dorms to the train. Jessica, Bryce, Shayna, and I were inseparable. We'd spent the summer studying literature at the University of Cambridge and sleeping in the same dorms, getting close the way camp friends do—together every waking hour until we left for home and forgot each other.

Our train would take us to London where we would spend a night at a hostel before returning for Monday's class. I led the group to Cambridge Station with written MapQuest directions, a task no one would have trusted me with at home in Orlando. But when we'd exited the redbrick entranceway of St. Catherine's, Jessica had asked me which way to go. I was surprised and flattered. I guess, to them, I fit the bill. Shayna was our free spirit, always wearing a smile and her hair down. Bryce was our shy, reserved man, not the type to take charge. And Jessica, though eager and intelligent (she went through a phase of getting up at five o'clock in the morning to read like her hero Ben Franklin had), was younger than the rest of the group, as her constant Harry Potter references reminded us. That left me. The one who was always on time to class. The one who had read every sentence of the twenty-six books required for the summer courses. The one who got to Cambridge a day early to get acclimated. They didn't know that I was just compensating for the flightiness I was known for at home. They didn't know that I used to have people call my best friend when they wanted directions to my house. I suppose I was tackling my issue with transportation and forgetfulness in an extreme way, going halfway across the world by myself. In England, I would be a Madison who remembered her shit and was handy with a map.

It was fun being with people who trusted me with what everyone at home would call one of my two worst qualities. This was different than leading a classroom of kids, than organizing English Honors Society meetings, than presenting projects. This was leading people over roads. A big deal to me, even if it was on a small scale. The trip to the station was only a twenty-minute walk, but in that moment, I had an opportunity to take charge of a group in a way that I never had before. The only problem was, I wasn't sure I was cut out for it. Back in Florida, I once spent an hour and a half looking for Co Road before realizing that *Co* was an abbreviation for *County*.

As the others talked, I zoned out of the conversation, training my mind to be a vigilant reader of street signs. The signs were not on metal poles like at home. In England, they had plaques stamped on the upper halves of buildings in a variety of sizes, colors, and fonts—sometimes a bronze plate with big block lettering, sometimes a thin wooden sign with Old English script. I read them all, taking my steps carefully. We didn't take that many turns (four if you counted coming out of our dorms and hanging a right), so the job was an easy one for most people, but I was the girl who got lost five minutes away from her own home.

South on Trumpington.

Left on Lensfield.

Right on Hills.

Left on Station.

Most of the directions seemed simple enough, only there was this tricky bit after Lensfield, where we were supposed to take a slight right. It was a kind of half-step that I'd noted on my paper, but it was hard to gauge exactly where this half-step was. I halted on a corner and

everyone else did too. Apparently, I really was the leader of the pack. Poor saps had no idea this was my first time, and I wasn't going to be the one to tell them. It would've been embarrassing to admit I was a virgin when everyone assumed I was a woman of experience. I bit my lip hoping I hadn't misled us, but I didn't want to express my doubt out loud. This was my moment to test myself—to see if I could succeed when no one else was looking.

I studied my notes. Before us was a five-way crossroad where cars sped around a gold statue. Behind the statue, one of the roads shot off at a funny angle. It seemed to me like a half-step. I looked at my notes and up again, debating on whether or not to take it. Finally, I suggested we turn down that funny angle and hoped my intuition was correct.

They bobbed their heads and advanced with me, having no idea that I could be totally wrong. Jessica's brown ponytail swayed as she stared up at the tops of buildings, chattering on about Harry Potter architecture. Bryce paused, picking up fifty pence off the sidewalk before scurrying back into line. He always had his head down hunting for change, accumulating well over ten quid before our study abroad trip was through. Shayna smiled and studied the area beside her, but not in front. It was funny to see them act like I did at home when I had my boyfriend drive my car. I never looked for road signs or took in landmarks, I just coasted. And here I was at the other end of it, having other people coast off me.

My direction trouble started back when I was fifteen and legal to drive. I'd aced the written permit test and was ready to take the wheel. My father opted to teach me, or by default, had been given the responsibility—my mother would not drive with a child, she'd said.

My first time behind the wheel, I'd pulled out onto Farragut Street, the neighborhood backroad, getting a feel for the vehicle. I played with the pressure of the pedals. Five over the

speed limit, five under. The slightest shift of my hand veering us in a different direction. I barreled forth. Ahead, by the city park, was my first stop sign.

“Stop! Stop!” My dad clapped his hands together. “Fucking stop.”

My arms went rigid. “But the stop sign is so far ahead.”

My dad stomped his foot on the ground like he had his own brake. “I said stop.”

I slammed my heel down, and the car jerked forward, and then back again. My ponytail pounded into the headrest.

My dad smacked his hand on the center console. “You stopped in the middle of the fucking road!”

“I know,” I said. I might have also said “fuck.” Grinding my teeth, I turned up the music and kept driving.

At the main road, Sheridan, I tried to keep up with the speed limit. The extra ten miles an hour proved to be a problem. I overly corrected myself, always grazing one lane line or the other. My father gripped the oh-shit handle. We were going to the mall, a twenty-minute ride, and things were not looking good.

“We have to turn soon,” my father said, using his fake calm voice. I nodded. We were in the middle lane. The car swayed more as I looked at the buildings around me, trying to remember which way to go.

The calm voice left, and my dad smacked the console again. “Get into the fucking lane already.”

I shouted over the music, “Which lane is the fucking lane, Dad? The left lane or the right lane?” I gripped the wheel tighter. “Because right now, the fucking lane is looking like all three.”

My dad slammed his thick hands on the dashboard, spit flying out of his yellow teeth.

“Just pull over. Pull the fuck over right now.”

I put my blinker on and checked my mirrors. I let a car pass and clumsily crossed into the lane.

“Pull the fuck over,” my dad said, stomping again.

But there was no place to pull over. There was just sidewalk and road.

“Pull over the goddamned car.” He kicked both feet in front of him.

I put on my hazards and jerked the car to a halt, hoping no one would hit us from behind.

“You’re stopped in the middle of the fucking road again,” my dad screamed, throwing his hands in front of him, displaying the street to me.

“I fucking know.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest, and refused to go any farther.

And so went my first driving experience. The others were similar. So, when my friends came to class gloating about how many practice hours they logged, I had very little to offer to the conversation, the training hours not quite as fun for me as for them. Four years later, I finally got my license, but I’d already begun to rely on friends instead of my parents for rides. My driving abilities were shaky at best, and my directional prowess was laughable. Most people learned streets and avenues, east and west in their training hour days. Not me. My lack of knowledge became a running joke for everyone. This went on well into my college years, until traveling somewhere by myself became something I couldn’t do, instead of something I wouldn’t—my directional inabilities evolved into a tenet of my personality. A tenet I only began to question while in England.

I, surprisingly, guided us to Cambridge Station without a hitch. We boarded the train, skipping several cars to find empty seats that were close to one another. Jessica and I took two adjoining seats, Shayna sat one row behind, and poor Bryce sat in a window seat across from us, blocked off by a tubby, old, English man. Bryce seemed not to mind, though, retreating into a novel. I followed suit and took out my own book. It was a map book—a present from my mother who had been terrified for my safety when I told her I intended on venturing into the city. I, thankfully, remembered to bring it.

At the end of the book was an index of street names and Tube stops. I nudged Jessica with my arm to show her the bolded letters of King's Cross Station (where our train would lead) before flipping to the map where it was located. I'd had my fun guiding us to Cambridge Station, but I did not trust myself to lead the way when we got to London. I was ballsy, not stupid. Jessica was young, but she could step up.

"Here's where the train's gonna spit us out," I told her.

Jessica glanced at the map and nodded without really looking at it. She just shrugged. "When we get to King's Cross Station, can we take a picture at Platform 9 3/4?"

I muttered a yes and turned to Shayna instead. She grabbed the book from me and scanned the page for a couple of minutes before passing it back, which settled my nerves a bit. *Someone* had to know what she was doing. London was a bigger arena than the small town of Cambridge, and we did, after all, have a check-in time to make.

I'd written down Mapquest directions from King's Cross to the hostel, our epic trek. I took them out and tried to follow the path on the page with my finger, sliding it over the thick yellow main roads, moving slower when I came to tinier white streets, and even slower when the

roads were so tiny, they weren't even roads anymore but paths marked by black dotted lines. I wanted to make sure the directions were correct, that everything connected as it should, that I had not skipped a step. When my finger reached the end point, I breathed a sigh of relief. I poked Jessica with my elbow to show her, but she just pointed out the window to the English countryside and made a comment about the wispy grass, and so again, I raised my book to Shayna.

This time Shayna waved me off and closed her eyes for a nap. I looked over at Bryce who still had his head in a book. I was afraid of annoying the man in-between us (and playing into the loud American stereotype), so I let Bryce be, but there was something very unsettling about the fact that no one needed a plan before arrival. I'd always been with people who planned. Why weren't they paying attention? Everyone seemed so relaxed, but I had a feeling of unease that wouldn't rest. Finally, I gave up and took out a different book, *The Rebel of the Family*, to brief myself for Monday's class. A nervous cramp settled in my stomach and refused to go unnoticed.

Usually, it was like me to sit back and not worry. Relinquishing my driving responsibilities in high school meant extra study time in the car. Friends picking me up for baton, Aikido, and ballet class meant I didn't have to spare the extra energy focusing on navigation. In college, when I planned performances for my baton students, my boyfriend drove me to the venue, so I would have one less thing to worry about. With so many balls in the air, taking on another responsibility that many were willing to do for me seemed ridiculous. Besides, no one expected me to.

When we arrived at King's Cross Station (after taking Jessica's picture at Platform 9 3/4), we exited a urine-smelling corridor to tall buildings, high billboards, busy roads, and bums. The directions were in my hand, ready to pass off to whoever was willing. I knew where we were headed, but the getting there, that was the hard part. The city was daunting and inviting all at the same time—the pretty yellow brick arches with the connected clock tower, the people scurrying by lugging suitcases, the black cabs whizzing about looking straight out of 1960. I turned to my travel-mates, curious who our city guide would be, and found they were all staring at me.

“Where do we go?” Jessica asked.

“What?” I shook my head. “Don't look at me.”

“You do have the map,” Shayna said, nodding along with Jessica.

That was true. I did have a map, and I tried to show it to them on the train, but that was because I thought one of them could use it. Not for myself. No wonder no one else was concerned—they thought I had it covered, but I couldn't tell east from west. They were lucky we'd gotten to the station okay. We had to get to our hostel by the three o'clock check-in. If I was leading, the forty-minute hustle Mapquest quoted, would surely turn into an hour and a half.

But there they were, looking at me expectantly. I'd been trusted with people's children, with taking the lead on group projects, with organizing my home's utility bills, but this was a different thing all together. I wanted to believe I could do it, even though I knew it was a stretch—I'd once spent two hours driving somewhere only forty-five minutes away and called my boyfriend crying in panic. I wondered what people from home would think of me here in the city, leading others over avenues and bridges. They would think disaster.

But wouldn't it be nice if I could do it? I made the leap from ballsy to stupid, took out my map, and tried to appear confident, both for the group and myself. When I navigated the route with my finger on the train, everything was hypothetical, but now I'd have to pay attention to how the space on the page transferred to the space on the street, to how many major intersections were between Step One and Step Two. I wondered what major intersections even looked like, what the smaller intersections might look like. It was a new way of thinking for me.

King's Cross had several entrances and exits, and I had no idea which one we were at. I looked around for some sort of indication. I saw arched windows, a green awning, and red construction fences. But, of course, there was no picture of the station on the map, only a red circle with a blue line through it. I shifted on my feet trying to make a decision. I went right, hoping the street sign I desired would pop out at me. The others followed behind, in that state of wandering idleness I was so used to myself. When we got to the corner, I found it was the wrong street and so about-faced to the left, hoping for better luck on the other side. The others didn't say a thing. They just followed me again, like I was a mother duck. What probably added to their confidence in me was the fact that I'd spent two weeks in London before coming to Cambridge. But, what they didn't account for, was that when I was here before, I'd been with my parents. During those two weeks, I was the duckling. It was a position I was comfortable with, one I knew I could do.

The next corner turned out to be the correct one, and so did my next turn, and the one after that. As my friends trailed behind me, the queasiness in my stomach turned to a happy fluttering. I matched up street names with the marks on the map. I began to think that my directional inabilities and my memory problems weren't qualities that would be with me until the

end of time. Just because I was bad at directions in high school, didn't mean the flaw had to carry into my adulthood. We grow out of a lot of things as we get older—take picky eating, for instance.

Growing up, I only ate chicken noodle soup, Progresso exclusively, but my family wouldn't let this habit continue into my twenties. When I was nineteen, my brother, Kale, took me out to a Japanese restaurant and insisted that I eat sushi. The menu was filled with horrifying creatures of the underworld: yellowtail, crab, salmon, and even eel.

I'd looked up at him, feeling ten again, bullied by my big brother. "Please don't make me."

But he'd shaken his head. He'd been fighting to expand my palate for years now. "You don't really hate fish. You just think you do," he said. When the server came around, Kale ordered simple rolls like yellowtail with rice and nori, along with other, skin-crawling options like the spider and salmon skin rolls. When she came back with the food, my brother handed me chopsticks. "It's okay," he said. "You don't have to eat it all. You just have to try it."

So, with a scrunched nose, I popped the simplest one, the yellowtail, in my mouth. I was amazed at how subtle the flavor was, at how easily the fish dissolved on my tongue. I lost my fear and began to eat willingly, and though I didn't have the tastebuds for the spider roll (cream cheese and raw fish should always be separated), I did find the crunch of the salmon skin roll satisfying. I think my turnaround had a lot to do with expectations. People believed I would grow out of my picky eating, and I did. No one believed I would be able to navigate my way around a city—until my Cambridge friends.

I never missed a beat, though, even when the street names started sounding less English and more German, and the roads got narrower, and the road signs got harder to find. I led us all the way, zoning in on my surroundings as I had when I walked us to Cambridge Station. I Xeroxed to memory the particular moldings of angels on one building, the wide stoop of another, the blue wicker chairs outside this restaurant, and the cluster-stoned walls of that one. I memorized them so that I would be able to lead us back with confidence. I tried to remember what every turn looked like and how long we spent walking on each road. I practiced the process of retraining myself.

When we finally arrived at the hostel, on time at that, I felt like I'd overcome a nagging imperfection that had been with me for the greater part of my years. I was self-assured walking through those large, silver doors into the bright red building. Even more so because it was immediately apparent that this hostel was a clean one. I had worried about the conditions, having never stayed in one before and hearing far too many disgusting stories about roaches and dirty sheets and scary hobos and killers. This one, however, seemed to be equipped with brand new Ikea furniture. Everything was sleek, bright, and boxy. It was the Disney of hostels. What appeared to be a middle school group sat on the wide steps that led up to the second floor. Some people might have been put off by this, the noise of a bunch of kids talking over one another, but I found it comforting. People felt their children were safe here. I gave myself a mental pat on the back as I approached the reception desk for I was the one who booked the hostel.

The woman behind the counter looked up from her computer to greet me. She had the swag of a professional, dressed in a red blazer to match the red walls and a ballerina bun on top of her head. "How may I help you?"

“We have a reservation for tonight.” I handed her the slip of paper where I’d written down our confirmation number. I gave myself another pat on the back for remembering it. “It’s under Bernath.” The woman took the paper from me and typed loudly on her keyboard the way they do in airports. She frowned, then typed some more. Then shook her head and typed even more. I wondered what the hold up could be. My stomach tightened as I debated the possibility of having written the down the confirmation number wrong.

She finally gave the keyboard a rest. “I’m sorry, but you do not have a reservation tonight.”

My heart paused a beat. “Is our confirmation number correct? Are we at the right hostel?”

She smiled with pity, and I began to dislike her. “You’re at the right place, but not on the right day. These reservations are for tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Was it possible that I clicked the wrong date on accident? Did I mistake my Saturdays and Sundays? This woman was ruining my moment of triumph and glory.

“You can still plug us into a room, right?” I asked, trying to stay hopeful, my back now itching with sweat.

“I’m afraid not. We’re all booked up. You could try a hostel that’s a few miles from here. I could point it out to you on a map, but Saturdays are busy, and they might be full as well.” She didn’t even offer to call and ask, and we had no cell phones. My mouth dried up as I realized I’d led everyone to a place that was not ready to take us.

I slowly took back my slip of paper and retreated to my friends, defeated. I’d led them through the streets all right, but my inability to keep track of my crap screwed us anyway. My optimistic Disney fantasy of overcoming my flaws if I only *believed* was idiotic. As soon as I

spit the story out, Shayna snapped into action, our easy-going girl taking charge. She marched over to the woman with my slip of paper, demanding that we had, in fact, booked the right day—that something was wrong with their database. Her positivity turned to fire. I wasn't sure if she really believed I hadn't been at fault, or if she was just afraid of where we'd spend the night if we left. We didn't have enough money for a hotel, and if we didn't find a hostel with open beds soon, we could end up on our asses. I watched her, staying back with the others, scared by the possibility of losing our place to stay.

After ten or so minutes of Shayna standing her ground, she walked back to us with two sets of keys, grinning. “We can't get a private room like we wanted, but I talked her into letting two of us into the girls room and two of us into the co-ed.”

We all thanked Shayna for her powerful performance. She coasted up the stairs ahead of us, and as we followed, I bit my trembling lip, still angry with myself for not double checking the reservations. I might have been overloaded with too many tasks—the packing, ticketing, mapping, and reserving too much to handle at once. Why hadn't I allocated that job to someone else? I was so good at allocating. It was remembering the details myself that I had issues with.

These issues went way back, but one day in seventh grade was especially bad. My dad dropped me off at school as he usually did, and then headed home. I'd bounced into English class, my favorite class, and scooted into my seat ready to learn.

“How'd your paper go?” my friend asked me, waving hers in the air.

My stomach dropped, and my hand shot up. I'd left my paper in the printer at home.

“Miss Thomas! Can I use your phone to call my dad?”

On the other end of the line, my dad yelled, but promised to come before the end of class, so I wouldn't get a zero. Twenty minutes later, a buzz from the front office came through, and I was saved.

I went to science, knowing that I had my homework in my binder, adrenaline still coming down from the near F (As an A student, an F would have been a traumatic affair). I sat down at the lab table and searched my backpack for my science book. I didn't see it. I poured everything onto the table, but my book wasn't there. No book meant no participation grade. I raised my hand again. My father cursed on the phone, but was back twenty minutes later, so I'd have my book for at least half the class. The bell rang for lunch.

I'd forgotten that too. My dad let out a stream of obscenities on the other end of the line, and I moved away from Ms. McKinney, so she wouldn't hear him. But he came anyway.

That day lived on in infamy. Whenever I tried to assert my retentive memory, this story was cited. And rightly so. All the way from middle school to college, at least once a month, I left my purse at a restaurant or a class or a friend's house. Once I got my car, finding my keys to go anywhere was an hour ordeal at the least. I tried to organize myself with an agenda to compensate for my memory, but even that sometimes failed, though to be fair, I didn't try very hard. In Cambridge, I hadn't written down the date for our hostel stay and because of that, I'd booked it wrong.

Shayna had saved us, though. Upstairs, we checked out our rooms, dropped our backpacks in lockers, and congregated in the third-floor hallway. Now that the group knew my little secrets, they'd relegate me to my usual roles just like my friends and family at home. I supposed there were some things that really were just part of my makeup.

“Where to?” I asked the group. Shayna shrugged her shoulders, and Jessica had already seen her Harry Potter relic and so was indifferent.

“Jubilee Gardens,” Bryce pushed, naming the famous park with the street performers, the unassuming vendors who sold ice-cream and books, and the London Eye. I’d been there already with my parents, but I was all for going back. The place had a carnival-meets-flea-market feel to it and lit up pretty at night. So, I pulled out my map book to look up the nearest Underground station to the Gardens. Someone else could take it from there.

As I skimmed, Shayna nudged me. “Would it be all right if I stashed my key and wallet in your purse?” she asked. At first, the question didn’t register. Didn’t she see that my flightiness almost left us homeless for the night? That maybe the group had instilled a little too much faith in me? I started to say something, but Jessica and Bryce were already taking out their stuff and handing it over. I was Mother Goose again. I wanted to tell them not to hold so much stock in me, that I couldn’t hold on to my own belongings much less theirs, that nobody at home would be crazy enough to hand me their credit cards, but they seemed so unfazed by the earlier incident. To them, I was still the Madison who kept track of her shit. That was the Madison I wanted to be. So, I grabbed everyone’s keys and cash, and as it turned out, Shayna’s camera too, and stuck them in my black leather purse.

I made sure everything was secure, that the zipper tab was in front of my body and not behind it. I’d heard of robbers standing at the backs of tourists, opening zippers, and collecting the merchandise. That would not happen to me. I promised myself I would keep track of these belongings. I now preferred salmon skin rolls to chicken noodle soup. Anything was possible. I’d

slipped up before, but I hadn't had much practice. For years I hadn't paid attention to these issues. Maybe it wasn't as simple as flipping a switch. Maybe it was a longer process.

We walked down the steps to the lobby, and I referenced my map book. "I guess we should take the Northern line to Waterloo."

I led us out of the silver doors—with everyone's most important things under my arm—back to King's Cross Station. This time it was harder because I was worrying about two things at once. As I traced our steps backward to the Tube station, I kept an eye on the landmarks and a hand on my zipper. Sometimes I'd falter. Was this, in fact, the restaurant with the cluster-stoned walls that I remembered turning at, or was it was someplace different? Did the building before have balconies? As I looked up at the building and debated in my mind, I tried always to keep an eye on the periphery—to appear vigilant even when confused. The others wandered as before, but I was set on hyper aware. My limbs ached with tension. I wanted to be able to do this so badly. I wanted to know I could.

With only a couple wrong turns (that were immediately addressed), we made it to the Underground station. My morale was building. I held onto the zipper of my purse with one hand and created the first link to our human chain with the other. I squeezed us through the hallways teemed with people bumping us on either side. I checked to make sure we were on the correct platform—the one where the Northern line went south in the direction of Euston. (There had been other times—not with this group—where I'd gotten on the right line going in the wrong direction, and I took special care not to repeat that with my new entourage. I was learning.) It took eight stops to get to Waterloo. As we walked out of the station under that large archway adorned with coats of arms, I hugged my purse close to my body and smiled.

MUSCLE MEMORY

I looked out the window at the wall of trees surging up and over the train like a wave—a green tunnel leading from Cambridge to London. I didn't know what kind they were, but it was the height of summer, late July, and they were as bright as they'd ever be. My mind named them spruce, juniper, poplar—names of trees I'd read in Victorian novels, but didn't have images for. I grew up with palm trees and oak—with fresh cropped lawn grass, unlike the thin, wispy foliage outside my train window. I drummed my bone-bitten fingernails on my armrest, far away from the safety and comfort of home.

I'd come to England to have an experience of my own, leaving every acquaintance, friend, best friend, boyfriend, brother, mother, father, every-person-I-knew-in-the-world behind. I wanted experiences that were mine alone, that I could hoard and share with no one. For a month and a half, I lived in my own dorm room, instead of sharing a room with my boyfriend. For a month and a half, I arranged my own weekend excursions—like this one to Shakespeare's Globe—instead of my parents planning them for me as they had on family trips. Now I had a chance to find out who I was without those influences, without those familiar places and people.

But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared. Before I basked in the glory of *King Henry VIII* at the Globe, I planned to meet up with other Cambridge study abroad students at a pub, but I'd met them on an internet forum, so who knew if they were felony-free prep school kids or molesters or even real people. If I met up with them, I'd be taking a risk, but there was also a risk traversing England's big city alone. I could fall into trouble there. Who was I kidding? I could fall into trouble here, in this seat. I'd seen what happened to Hitchcock characters on trains—they died—and I had no one to look out for me. My wardrobe made me an easy target, singing

the Star Spangled Banner with my flared blue jeans, free-falling hair, and baby heels; I stood out like a color guard girl at a baton competition. The other women on the train wore colorful skinny jeans, high buns, and rhinestoned flats. They belonged. They had companions. They leaned over the seats to one another—laughing, passing Kinder chocolate bars, talking about whatever pub/club/shop/restaurant they looked forward to.

I, on the other hand, was alone. Alone and twenty-two. Alone and American. Alone and five-foot-one-inch tall. It didn't matter how much self-defense training I'd had before this moment, or how excited I'd been to make it to the city by myself, I was vulnerable.

It was the last national championships I'd ever compete at. If I wanted to, I could compete in college, but by then I'd be over the hill. Baton twirling was a girl's sport. The senior division, my division, was the one to watch—with the girls old enough to have the sport perfected, but young enough to have no outside distractions. I'd just graduated high school, and I was about to let go of the most important and all-encompassing aspect of my life. But not until the national championships were through. It was July, and I was as bright as I'd ever be.

I stood on the practice floor with eleven other girls my age, most of whom I'd twirled with since age five. The morning was early, but I wasn't tired. The smell of sweat and feet, the smell of the gym, rejuvenated me. It entered me like caffeine, giving me all the energy I needed to win. The smell, the cold room tensing my muscles, the slam of the baton on wood, the slap of the baton on calloused hands, my coach's—my aunt's—voice arcing over my teammates and me from the bleachers, all of this readied me for the day ahead, for my last hurrah, for what I hoped would be my final win.

But you never knew what could happen to you on the competition floor. It was a world of its own and you could practice for sixteen years like I had, all to bomb in the two minutes and thirty seconds you had in front of the judge.

Before July, before my last national championships, before competition season even began, I was on the basketball court of my local gym (the place I spent every afternoon and evening after school) practicing baton. It was the first Wednesday in October, and my coach called out counts from the center line—my team and I fought to remember the next move after each clap of her hand. She may have been my aunt, but at practice she was a coach, and she was God, controlling our actions with every beat she made. Our routine was new, only finished the week before.

One - Two -

I looked from left to right—making sure I was in the correct place for our triangle formation—before pulling up high on my toes and circling my baton over my head.

Three - Four -

I flashed to the back, hand whipping around rainbow-like.

Five - Six -

I carved the baton in a loop by my lower back.

Seven -

I released the baton into the air, the rotation fast.

Eight -

I turned under it—once, twice,

One -

three-times, four-times.

Two -

I caught the baton and slapped it to my side.

Three - Four -

Concentrated on the catch, I forgot the next move. I looked to the left—my teammates broke to change formations. But to where? I looked to the right. They made it no clearer. What were we moving to? A circle? Windows? A diamond? I stood still. One of my teammates crashed into me. The clapping stopped.

Fuck, Madison. Move to the diagonal line.

I looked up to my aunt, arms crossed over her chest, heel beating the ground in frustration. I spit out an apology.

Start at the top.

The girls groaned.

One - Two -

Before I caught that train to London, I was just a teenager, whose parents forced me to spend one night a week doing something other than baton, a Japanese martial art called Aikido. It was a distraction from my real life, my twirling life, and I regarded it as such. I never thought that it might do me well to pay attention in Aikido class, to practice hard, that it might help me out one day in the future when I was twenty-two and about to walk the London night-life alone. No, that didn't cross my mind.

My parents owned the Aikido dojo, both high ranking and sought-after Aikidoists themselves. But it was their sport, not mine. I wanted to dance in spandex, not fall on a smelly matt in a bulky, white training uniform. I'd been anti-Aikido since I started at five years old, and I was not subtle in my disinterest.

My father, my *sensei*, would lead my Aikido class every Thursday. We'd all sit on our knees in a semi-circle around him as he demonstrated a technique on his assistant, saying things like, *Watch as I move right past his left side, holding my hand up to his face like I'm going to stab his eyes out*, but I always had a hard time listening. Instead, I'd poke my training partner with my elbow and ask what he had for lunch that day, or if he thought the two kids over there were dating, or I'd just make fun of my dad. My dad would glare at me until I stopped talking, and then move on, saying something like, *Step behind him, hug his head to you shoulder, and step through. Circle your arm up high and release him to the mat*. Then, the body of the assistant would go flying, and my dad would double clap, and we would all stand up to practice the technique. I always had the same question for my partner, *Did you catch any of that?*

It took me a long time to wade through the colored belts reserved for children, and I just obtained my first adult rank during my senior year of high school. It wasn't because I was only then considered an adult—other kids my age far surpassed me. It was because I didn't care to learn. Looking back, I hate the way I acted in the dojo, and not just for disrespecting my father, but also because I closed myself off to an art that would've done any girl good to embrace. Baton was my life, I thought. Self-defense wasn't relevant to me—not yet.

London turned dark, which meant it was late—in the English summer the sun came up before five in the morning and sank down after nine at night. I hadn't located the internet forum group and had gone to the play solo. *King Henry VIII* came to a close, and I applauded from my hardwood seat, and applauded, and applauded some more. Finally, the actors cleared the stage. The crowd stirred and rose, and I rose with them. My arms felt a chill, both from the breeze and from the slap back to reality. The reality in which I was friendless.

I'd thought I might like my solitary adventure, but it turned out it was just lonesome. Alone can be fine. It can be soothing. When I'm watching Netflix on my couch. Or reading in my bed. Or at the kitchen table eating stir fried beef udon, the one recipe from my childhood that my dad taught me to make. Yes, alone can be soothing. But alone can be other things in a dark and foreign city.

As the sun disappeared, it was certainly not soothing to realize I'd be alone on unfrequented backstreets, and—as it was looking—on those streets for a lot longer than I'd planned. On my way to London, I'd given myself plenty of time, factoring in a whole extra hour and a half before the play. But now, on the way back, I had a narrow window of opportunity to catch my Cambridge-bound train—meaning I could end up walking those streets looking for a hostel instead of a way back to the dorms. The last train would leave in an hour, and I still had to navigate my way to the Tube stop and figure out which lines were open that could take me to the train station. The most common routes were closed for construction thanks to the 2012 Olympic preparations. I was looking at a forty-minute Tube ride at least.

But that wasn't the worst part. As I squeezed my way down the steps, through the crowded courtyard, and over to the iron gates, the sky getting darker by the second, I was coming to realize one inescapable fact.

I had no directions.

When I'd arrived in London, I stupidly threw out my safety net, a scribble of MapQuest steps. I wasn't sure they were correct, so when I got off the train, I'd asked an old woman for help. She gave me the backroad route of the natives, which I'd found much more appealing and adventurous—in the daytime. Walking those same streets at night seemed not adventurous, but dangerous. Now, her words were fading, and I had no back up references. I shook my head trying to remember the places she'd named: the big circular building, the Tate, the Clink, the shoe store, the discount shop. There were more, but they wouldn't surface. I came from the west, I knew that at least.

Asking the hundreds of playgoers around me seemed almost impossible. They were immersed in conversations about costumes and accents and authenticity. Their circles were shoulder to shoulder, as if warding me off. As if intentionally leaving me out. Go away, they seemed to say, face those shadows yourself, see how brave you really are. The level of English accessibility was really like day and night. I took a step to approach one of the groups, a few women who looked roughly my age, but as I got closer, I caught a raised eyebrow from one of the girls, and so stepped away. I didn't dare approach the men, afraid of calling attention to myself—I remembered my mom's warnings. Instead, I turned back to the gate.

Facing the outside, I cringed at the thought of those backroads, so enticing before, now threatening. I was a small woman with tight pants and cleavage. I lamented not paying more

attention in Aikido class. Taking a deep breath, I walked out of the iron gates with the all-American intent to go west.

I stood on the sidelines at the national championships with my teammates, watching our competition. We were up in two. I held my fingers by my sides as I watched them, shooting one out of my fist every time I saw a drop. I had two fingers by my side so far, an upside-down peace sign, but I meant no peace. In my head, I chanted, *drop, drop, drop*, but they never listened. They held on. Their batons went up at the exact same height. Their bodies turned floor to ceiling at exactly the same speed and angle. The batons slapped down on their hands at the same instant. Their heads snapped to the side at the same time. They had identical glistening smiles framed with heavy plum lipstick, grinning up to the arena seating, selling it to the judges. My stomach contracted. It was tight, and I regretted having eaten that blue frosted cookie—the one that was the size of my hand. My stomach muscles clenched around the cookie, conspiring to push it up and out. The final notes of the music echoed throughout the gym and our competition hit their final pose, stretched, elegant, and powerful. I pinched my fingers back into my fist.

“I counted two,” I whispered to my teammates. I could see it in their faces—the sucked-in cheeks, the wide glassy eyes. They felt the same as me. In other competitions, we’d had our own two-drops, one-drops, no-drops, but it was different here. The ceiling was higher than at other competitions. The floor bigger. And the pressure. I squinted my eyes and looked up at the judges watching the team leave the floor, dictating their notes to the clerks at their sides. Soon those judges would be talking about me, about my team. My mouth felt dry. I wished for water.

Blinking away the glitter from my eyelashes, I followed my teammates, in single file, down the black boundary line to where we would enter the floor for competition. We passed by our nemeses, and I put on the same broad smile I just saw them demonstrate.

“Great job.” I reached out my hand to touch their feature twirler’s glistening shoulder.

My teammates expressed similar sentiments.

“You did great.”

“Hard act to follow.”

“Sharp show.”

“It’s such a joy to see you perform.”

“Good luck,” our competition replied. “You always do wonderful.”

We locked pinkies with them and kissed the insides of our fists for luck.

Fake luck.

I knew they hoped we failed, just as we wanted them to. Only they didn’t. They were strong. And now the stakes were higher. As soon as we passed by, I let my smile go. I was unsure if we could beat them. I felt my pulse in my chest, my neck, and even on the insides of my elbow. I’d trained so hard for this. My body vibrated with anticipation, buzzing with intensity. If we didn’t do as we practiced, it’d be a sorry death of my baton career, the life I’d invested so much in. I breathed in deep and hoped that in a few moments, when it came down to it, I would take the floor with my team, and we would triumph.

Before nationals, but well into summer vacation, we had a two-week long baton bootcamp. It may have been a break from school, but we were far from having a break from

twirling. I sweated through thirteen-hour days, Monday through Friday. My aunt gave us the weekend to rest our muscles, but really, we were expected to practice at home too.

We were back in the same triangle formation. My aunt wanted a better view, so instead of clapping on the centerline, she stood on the bleachers with a microphone headset, shouting down at us whenever she saw anyone out of line, literally. We stepped off into the diagonal, the music building. I stretched my arm over my head, and saw that I was the mirror image of the twirlers next to me. The whole line was a mirror image. Except—

“Natalie,” my coach said, “get your ass back in line. Move girl! Move!”

I shot a glance to the front left and saw that Natalie had paused on her way to the diagonal line, perhaps caught a trick late, perhaps got the baton caught in her shirt. She couldn't have forgotten the next move, though—we were well past that, months past that. Natalie rushed to keep up.

“I'm going to get Brenda to take your place,” my aunt said, and she meant it. Once she replaced someone minutes before we took the competition floor.

But then Natalie was with us, and we were perfect. I wound the baton over my head and slung it in an exchange, tossing it off to another twirler. It sailed over seven heads before landing on the opposite side of the gym, in the hand of my partner, who caught it so fluidly, you would have thought she had it all along. I caught a baton too. We flowed. I moved on my toes. We all moved together. I stretched my spine as far as it would go. My arms ached from being locked so tightly, my calves flexed, relaxed, and then flexed again. My hamstrings burned with a familiar pleasure as I kicked and leapt. My baton flew up over my head with a dozen others at exactly the same height. I spun under it, keeping that coveted stick in my gaze, separate from the rest, as I

turned. It came down, closer, closer, and then smack on my hand. The sting vibrated from my palm up my arm and felt good, like I was some kind of warrior.

As we moved to the music, each elbow pointed at the same incline, each ponytail at the same tilt, I could feel that we were serious. I could feel we had a shot. I knew we could take it, be national champions. When the music died down and our batons lifted into the air for the last trick, I was keenly aware that I heard no whacks against the hardwood floor. We were contenders.

My freshman year of college, stories of Ted Bundy and his sorority-killing sprees scared me into taking self-defense seriously. I'd heard of these before, but now, actually on a campus, the threat felt real. Since I'd moved from Ft. Lauderdale to Orlando, I no longer had access to an Aikido dojo even though I was now willing to give it a shot. My parents, though disappointed I hadn't shown interest earlier, were eager for me to enroll in some type of self-defense class, whether it was the art they loved or not. They, too, knew the Ted Bundy stories.

As it turned out, my university offered a women's self-defense class taught by a man with many years experience on the police force and many scary stories to go with those years: the woman lured outside of her house with a recorded baby cry, the man who was made to watch the rapist have his way with his wife, the murderer in Jacksonville who waited under his victims' cars before slashing the tendons in their ankles. He told us to stick knives in the crevices of our furniture, to stab aggressors in their armpits with forks, that a key in hand when walking to your car would do no good, that a rolled up newspaper could be a mighty weapon. In our morning routines we clawed faces, we kneed groins, we elbowed invisible men in the nose and in the ribs.

He drilled us and drilled us until it became second nature, until if attacked we wouldn't have to think, our bodies would just react. I hoped I'd never have to use any of this, but I wanted to be prepared in case I did. When I walked the London streets all those years later, I was glad for the practice.

Knife day. I can still feel his massive chest behind my head as he held a black plastic combat knife to my throat, demonstrating. It was hard and cold against my neck.

"The attacker has you. His weapon is sharp. One quick swipe and you're done. It would take less than a second for this man to take your life. What do you do?"

I looked down at his orange arm, white hairs sprouting off of it, and waited for my instructor to answer himself.

"You grab the blade," his voice boomed.

I looked up at his gruff, leathery face. "I'm sorry, what?" Why would I intentionally destroy my hand?

"Would you rather have your life or your fingers? Make a choice."

I grabbed the fake blade, imagining a sharp slice through the meat of my hand. He simulated shredding the knife through my knuckles, curving the blade up and down the soft tissue of my fingers. Would I have the strength to really withstand this kind of pain? Would the adrenaline for my life kick in? I hoped that under the pressure, I'd find the force I needed.

"Good," he said to me, and then addressed the class. "At this point it is your job to bite the hell out of his hand. Chew the prick's fingers off."

I gazed up at him again, unsure of what to do.

"Just act it out."

I looked at his thick yellowed nails and gripped my hand around his. As I opened my mouth, I thought about a day I might do this. A day where I'd give a killer something he never expected.

At the national baton twirling championships, I stood with my hands behind my back, spine straight, as we were called to the competition floor. I couldn't stop my legs from shaking. This was my last competition, the culmination of all my skills. Today, I would find out what I was really worth. The announcer blasted through the loudspeaker: *And now, the South Florida Suuuuper Starsssss*. The arena burst into applause. We had a lot of parents.

I held my breath as our captain counted us off, and we marched onto the floor. We looked like an Etch A Sketch—straight across the back, halfway down the black line, and then right up the middle. When we reached the center of the floor, we formed a circle, facing the outside. I squinted my eyes toward the bleachers, looking for the judges, but the lighting hid them. I knew I'd have to smile up there anyway. Shouts from parents and friends bounced off the arena walls, leaving my head unbalanced. I waited for the music to come on. My hands sweated in anticipation of that first beat. This was the moment I'd been training for.

Florida Super Stars, the judges are ready.

My head flushed with heat at the same time my arms goosebumped with chill.

My teeth felt dry outside my lips.

My heart pounded against my rhinestoned costume.

A wash of tears filled my eyes. I couldn't blink.

You may take the floor for competition.

As the first note of the music struck, I gathered myself under the pressure, hoping, wishing, that I was ready for this.

In the dark of London, I made a turn down a quiet road that looked semi-familiar. The street was bare, except for a single drunk that I passed at a girth. He shouted at me with a mouth full of missing teeth. I kept up my pace and held my jacket tighter, covering my chest. I cursed myself. Not only did I look American, I looked like an American whore. I hoped I'd come upon my next landmark soon, the discount shop.

I kept walking. The buildings seemed to be deteriorating as the street went on. I approached a high-rise with a cracked exterior. Two men stood on the concrete stoop outside of it, shuffling their feet and shooting the shit. I kept my head down and scurried past. If I didn't see or acknowledge them, they wouldn't me—at least that was my hope. I watched the ground instead of them, blurs of men in my peripherals. I heard them step off the stoop.

The sound of my heels on the pavement changed from delicate clicks to fast-paced clacks. At the same time, I heard their feet stumbling behind me, matching my steps with theirs. I looked at my shadow on the street and saw two behind it, gaining on it.

I tried to remember all the self-defense I knew. I thought of knife day. I wished I'd carried a fork in my purse. Hell, I wished I hadn't left my pepper spray in Orlando. I'd been afraid to take it to the airport. If only I could reverse that decision. What did I have? A wallet. A ticket to the Globe. A flimsy book. A stick of lipstick. Did they have a weapon? If they did, I was fairly sure it would be a knife. Guns were illegal in England. If that was the case, I'd still have a fighting chance. I could still get away, even if it cost me my hand to do it. I thought of the dojo,

of my mother who used Aikido to down three guys outside of a post office one night. They tried to take her gold necklace, and she tossed them to the ground. If only I paid attention. I could've been like her. I told myself to concentrate. I had, after all, spent a semester in a women's self-defense class. Hadn't I received an A and a standing ovation when I beat up that sandbag dummy for my final? I had. These weren't sandbag men, but that didn't mean I couldn't beat them.

The footsteps quickened behind me.

I raced forward, hands clammy in my jacket pockets. I should get into stance, I thought. I should be ready. So, I took my hands out and opened them at my sides, anticipating attack. I swiveled my head left to right, in a way I hoped would show the men that I was aware of my area, that I was not to be messed with.

I told myself I was in control, that I had worked these self-defense moves into the ground. That it would be like second nature. Ahead of me, I saw another shadow come into view. A tall man, about as tall as the sandbag dummy, presented himself almost a block away. Standing there in a tilted hat, he called out to the men behind me.

I wanted to deviate from my plan, to turn a corner onto a busier street, but there was no block to turn on before reaching this third man. I saw no bright lights to retreat to, no open shops or even apartment lobbies. It was so deadly quiet. I only heard the steps behind me and the call of the man. I kept my hands ready for attack and walked even faster. The footsteps seemed to be matching my pace, then exceeding it. They came closer.

I trained my eyes on the buildings in front of me, still hoping the "I don't see you, you don't see me" trick would work. I looked frantically for the discount shop. My eyes teared up. My mouth felt dry. My heart thumped hard in my chest. They were right behind me. I felt like I

was in the kind of dream where you're on a path and there's no way to get off, no way to stop what's happening from happening. *I'm fucked*, I thought.

I came up to the third man, smelled the body odor emanating off of him. I stepped past. He continued shouting at the men behind me. I broke into a jog. The discount shop, a beacon of hope and escape, revealed itself only a short ways off. The footsteps behind me faded out as I felt the harsh air in my throat, the chill down my arms. My legs numbed as I ran. I reached my landmark and looked back.

The three men simply stood, huddled together talking, just as they did on the stoop. I hadn't been followed after all. My chest heaved, and I put a shaking hand over it. I felt dumb and lucky. My face and ears were hot with embarrassment and adrenaline. I turned at the discount shop, walking quickly to the Underground station now in view.

As I rode the Tube to the train station, I tried to make sense of what had happened. Had all those years of taking Aikido, even if I was a bad student, put me on the defensive even when there was no threat? Had my self-defense teacher told me so many horror stories that I believed I'd soon be in one? My nerves still shook my body. Whether the scene played out or not, I still felt like I'd been on the verge of something real. Like I was on a crux of a defining moment. But nothing had happened. I hadn't been tested. I hadn't been able to find out exactly what I was made of. Though there was a very real possibility that I would have just lain on the hard concrete and cried, there was a sense of lost accomplishment.

When I finally got to the train (making the very last one with only minutes to spare), I hugged my legs to my stomach and covered my face with the tops of my knees. I ignored *Cymbeline*, the book I brought with me to keep me occupied on the long, hour and a half ride

back to Cambridge, and ran through the journey over and over again in my head. How would I have acted under the pressure? I liked to believe that, if it came down to it, when the first man struck, I'd have reacted with instinct and training.

A rush surged through my ears and down my body when the first note finally struck. I spun the baton over my elbow, head held high. I didn't have to look at the rest of my team to know we were in unison, to know we were perfect. I kept my eyes at the top of the stands in the direction of the judges. My body disconnected from my mind. It was as if my limbs moved on their own. They reacted to the beat, cause and effect. I was programmed to it. My back arched. My torso stretched. My toes pointed. The team and I moved like soldiers to our triangle formation, tight and flawless. We threw our batons into the sweet, sweaty air, and I turned—once, twice, three-times, four-times. My instrument sailed back down, gracefully falling into my open hand. I smiled—we smiled, we stretched, flexed, moved, barely thinking. Our bodies knew what to do.

THE EIGHT WONDERS OF WYCOMBE

I arrived in High Wycombe, England, after a harrowing train and Tube ride. I'd caught a couple of trains headed in the wrong direction and the Underground system mystified me. It took me five hours to reach Wycombe from Cambridge, a feat that could be accomplished in an hour and forty-five minutes by car. If I wasn't visiting friends, I might have been annoyed—but the fact that I would see Sam, Walker, Mike, and Henry tonight made the trek a little more livable. I met them back at home in Florida a couple of years ago, when they came to the States on holiday. Newly twenty-one, I drunkenly showed them the seven sunny wonders of Orlando: Will's Pub, Orlando Brewing, Lake Eola, Mill's Market, Leu Gardens, the Milk District, and Little Vietnam. Now, I was in their town, and I expected to see Wycombe's wonders. I needed it. After all, most of my time in England had been spent shuffling from Cambridge classroom to Cambridge classroom. I wanted to see the wild England outside of academia. And I had the boys to show me.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder, hungry for a decent cup of filtered coffee (something nonexistent in England), and exited the train at a small, near-empty station. Pushing through the heavy doors and out into the fading sun, I saw Sam waiting for me in his compact box of a car. A whirl of new energy pushed me down the steps. I ran with my arms wide open.

"Sam! I made it! Show me your city!" The train really had been a little harrowing—I was ecstatic to be with someone who knew where he was going.

Sam, skinny as he was, picked me up in a good firm hug, and I squeezed his neck tight. He put me down, and I held him at an arm's length so I could get a good look at him. He wore slim jeans and a band t-shirt, exactly the same as I saw him last. I hugged him again.

Sam shuttled me back to the house he shared with blond Mike and bearded Walker. In the car, I looked out the window at the sprawling hills and colonial-style houses. It struck me how familiar this place seemed. In fact, it looked exactly like New England—an apt name.

Sam led me to the backdoor of his whimsical clapboard home, with vines coming down the side of the house and a stone pathway that led to their kitchen door. When I walked in, the rest of the boys (even slight and shy Henry who did not live there) were waiting for me. I hugged each of them: quiet Henry; Mike, the womanizer/jokester; and Walker who was so sweet you would never guess he airbrushed porn with his father for a living.

The house had soft lighting, a projector instead of a TV set, and a record player. There were no dishes in the sink, the floors were swept, their record collection neatly organized. Here I found my first Wycombe wonder, and in only the first half hour of my journey—**Wycombe Wonder #1: A Clean House Inhabited by Boys Alone.**

I'd never met boys so clean. I thought it was an innate quality in men, messiness. I had four male roommates in Florida who thought it was normal to ash their cigarettes directly on the floor of our home. These Wycombe kids were like nothing I'd ever seen or heard of.

Even in the days of the Greek gods, men were messy. Zeus was messy. In his statue of Olympia (one for the Seven Wonders of the World), Zeus looks like my roommates, like a slob. He's not properly dressed, fabric just draped over his legs and shoulder, like a guy folded up in sheets. He has an eagle sitting next to him that chews on his scepter—that kind of bird has no place in a home—and in his left hand he holds a little statue of Nike, much in the same way a disheveled man would hold a TV remote.

These Wycombe boys defied history. I was impressed; they were cleaner than the gods.

“Well, we just moved in,” said Sam. “Give us time.”

Sam kept his hands shoved in the pockets of his pullover. It was the third Saturday in May, but still it was chilly. He walked up the cracked sidewalk to the unmarked building. Law prohibited it from being labeled. What happened behind those dull doors, only he and a few others knew.

He walked inside and his sneakers padded down the blue carpeting until he came to the video room, the room only Closed Circuit Television Operators (CCTOs) were allowed to enter. He nodded to the man sitting in the sleek, overly-expensive, adjustable chair. The man stood and walked past him, tapping Sam on the shoulder as he left through the door, a silent shift change.

The lighting was too bright; Sam liked it lower when he watched the flat screens. He dimmed the long-tubed bulbs that hung overhead and plopped down in the cushy chair. It was cozy now, but he knew when he got up in eight hours, his bones would feel differently. Sam spun the chair around in a circle a couple times before settling down to face the screens.

After a lovely dinner of spaghetti made with fresh tomato and leaves of basil (more an Italian wonder than a Wycombe one), we all sat around the wooden kitchen table debating plans for the night’s revels. Mike shot out from his chair.

“My God, men! We haven’t shown her the grass!”

I mistook this statement as a pronouncement of illegal grass, and happily followed the crew outside to the blockish backyard. I waited for a joint. I looked at Mike. He looked at the ground.

“There! You see what I’ve done?” He pointed to a little patch on the ground. In the fading light, I could just see some yellow-green, sick, scraggily growths poking their way out of the soil. They looked ill or dead, like they were intruders onto a land of caked dirt, and the dirt killed and won. Mike squatted down beside the sorry plants. “I grew that! What a green thumb, eh?” **Wycombe Wonder #2: Grass.**

I only saw grass equivalent to stubble, but Mike must have seen something comparable to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. He’d already envisioned the end result. Writers (maybe me) would exalt his prize foliage. The grass would become legendary, a token of his culture, and in fact, it might have been a little better than Florida’s stiff and tough crab grass.

“Oh, wow,” I said. “It’s . . . grass.”

Mike stood from his crouch and hit me in the arm. “Ey, gardening is a manly endeavor,” he said and flexed his arms.

There was a wall of televisions—fourteen of them—sixteen scenes playing out on each—a million town centers—all flashing down at Sam. When he first took this job, the 244 squares of people unnerved him. He thought he’d never be able to keep up with so many corners of the city, but now he’d gotten used to it. After several eight-hour shifts of watching the same places over and over again, he got acclimated to the rhythms of the people, the coming and going; he noticed when something wasn’t right, when something appeared out of the ordinary. At least there was no audio to go with the visual (or else there would literally be a wall of sound blasting at him).

For 480 minutes each shift, Sam watched life as it was in the city of Wycombe and its surrounding areas. He watched people eat, walk down the street, hurry in and out of shops, and

kiss their mothers good-bye. Sometimes he'd spot his friends—Walker, Mike, Henry, or whoever—and call them up: “Gettin’ pizza are you?” They’d find the camera nearest to them and flick it off.

Mostly, though, people forged through their day and either ignored or forgot he was there watching them. They forgot when they were drunk and made fools of themselves in fights, they forgot when they picked their nose, they forgot when they had sex. They had sex everywhere: cars, stairwells, churchyards, parks. Sam had to watch them—to make sure it wasn’t rape—but only for a minute. He could get caught. The watchers were not above being watched. Though he was a licensed professional, middle-aged men in tweed suits didn’t trust him. They could look in on him randomly—see him fidget in his seat or text on his phone—whenever they wanted. They sat in another room with other computer screens, following him and other CCTOs.

Being watched and watching other people didn’t bother Sam. It felt normal, natural. He watched the citizens’ everyday routines and the city’s big events. Like the weighing of the mayor, where each year the mayor was weighed in front of an audience. If the mayor gained weight on the tax payers’ dollar then he was booed, but if he lost it people cheered because he had been working so hard he hardly ate.

Sometimes Sam helped find criminals. Sometimes he stopped crimes. It wasn’t all hero tales though. There were incidents that couldn’t be stopped. Sometimes he couldn’t call for help fast enough. Sometimes he watched things he wished he hadn’t seen.

Before heading off to the bars that night, the boys decided that it would be a good idea to show me around town a bit. Since gas was so pricey in England, averaging out to almost ten

dollars to the gallon, Sam suggested we walk. Our first stop was the highway. Mike stood by a wall. On top of that wall, cars whizzed by.

“This,” he said slapping the concrete with one hand. “is the second largest retaining wall in Europe.”

I looked up at the cement mass. It looked like a wall. “Oh.”

Mike crossed his arms and stared down at me. “I don’t know if you know this, but Europe is a big place.”

I nodded. **Wycombe Wonder #3: The Second Largest Retaining Wall in Europe.** The retaining wall might have been the second largest in Europe, but (unless somehow the two largest retaining walls in Europe were in Wycombe, and my friends thought this second one more important) it *was* the first largest in Wycombe. The first largest of the three Pyramids in the Giza Necropolis was the Great Pyramid of Giza. It was actually the tallest man-made structure in the whole world for just under 4,000 years. You might think of a pyramid tomb as a place of rest, but there were both ascending and descending passages in the Great Pyramid of Giza. The dead flying back and forth through the tomb, just as the people zipped by on the highway above. Nowadays, in America and England, we think of the dead as kerplunk, stiffs, finished. We shove them in a box and under six feet of dirt. They “rest.” Not in Ancient Egypt. There the dead moved, they left the living, but they were given free range to travel up and down those pyramid passages.

We traveled our own way and kept walking.

As a CCTO, Sam had a responsibility to the police force. Now and again people went missing. The local bobbies would make it their top priority and drop whatever they were doing to find him/her—if nothing else was more pressing. Sam was just another element of that. On this occasion, like all the others, Sam was given a description: a hospital escapee, fifty-two, skinny, unkempt, dirty jeans, clean t-shirt, a denim jacket—and of course, a bloody face. An alcoholic who had gotten drunk that day (like every day), and hurt himself somehow—some kind of head injury. He'd come to at the hospital and torn off the bandages—walked out the door without a nurse's notice. The missing man's drinking problem combined with the head injury had the doctor at the hospital fearing the drunk would hurt himself or someone else.

Sam scanned the area around the bright white building looking for a guy to match the description. Everything appeared pretty normal around the perimeter: an ambulance pulled up, one EMT was eating crackers around the side of the building, worried loved ones raced to the automatic doors, a valet smoked out of the opened car window. Nothing to see here.

Sam zoomed out to look at the wider area. He wondered what the man would do. Would he simply fall over if he had a drink? Would his head injury trigger hallucinations? Would he get his hands on a knife and have himself a stabbing spree?

The police radioed again. Perhaps the damage had already been done.

The bartender at The Falcon called. Some guy with a bash to the head was ordering drinks, and he couldn't sit up right— nothing too strange, except the bartender noticed the guy's hospital wristband. The man just paid his bill, or rather threw his wallet at the bartender. Sam zoomed into the city center and focused on the pub's entrance. A denim jacket stumbled out, beer gut and about fifty. Sam radioed back the police.

“Yup, we’ve got a match,” Sam said as the man leaned against the streetlight pole and fell to his knees.

We came upon a large and official looking building. “Oh, this building is a very old building,” said Henry in one of his first sentences all evening. We stopped to look. It was big and square and made of bricks.

“How old?” I asked.

Henry checked a plaque near the arched entranceway. “Well, it was restored in 1850, so a good deal older than that.” He put his hands on his hips and stood in an expert’s pose with his chin in the air. “Very old this building is.” **Wycombe Wonder #4: A Very Old Building.**

I looked the building up and down in the dark. The facade was a ring of arches, which according my experience with aged things in St. Augustine, Florida, (the oldest city of the United States) did, in fact, mean quite old. “Yes, a very old building, indeed,” I said.

It didn’t have the pristine white polished look the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus once commanded before its ruin, but it had stately red brick that looked kind of regal, and the white pillars that dotted the first story of this building mirrored the thirty-six columns that circled the top of the Mausoleum in its grander days. It was fun to look up at the building, at the white molding near the roof, and think that in 1850, someone thought, *We ought to renovate this thing with all of our fancy new technology and skills.* Why was the Very Old Building of Wycombe saved and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus left to ruin? I wondered who decided that we must save this building and who decided the Mausoleum wasn’t worth it. What buildings are going to ruin now? What buildings will we think, *Shame they let that die*, in a few hundred or even a few

thousand years? Are our structures even worth saving? It isn't like the good old days when you worked on a building your father died working on and his father before him, all dying hacking away at the same stone. I suppose that's the real shame, the generations of work left to crumble.

The radio rang and Sam answered. Another missing person. This time a five-year-old boy, last seen in shorts and a t-shirt. Sam would look, but usually they didn't find the missing child, besides this kid didn't even live in the district. They'd just contacted the Wycombe CCTOs to cover all their bases.

Sam drummed his fingertips on the arms of the chair. It was a beat of his own. He drummed in five bands during whatever time he had off, which amounted to one day a week. His eyes darted from one screen to another, or he let his gaze drift back, taking in multiple scenes at once. Stiffs in suits dined outside of trendy cafes in the business district, reaching over the table to shake hands between sips of bitters. Teens hung out behind the school, smoking cigarettes and making out where ground security men didn't care to look. The city center was bustling as always, women in strappy summer sandals and men in breezy shirts swooshed by each other. Sam watched people walk past the gym, the hair salon, the coffee shop.

The door to the stationary store opened. A lone kid strolled out, shorts and a t-shirt—no mother or father behind him. Sam zoomed in, radioed the police, and told them he found a match for the description. He followed the kid with the camera. The child scuffed his feet on the concrete, looking down and playing with the bottom of his shirt. He walked straight ahead, towards the street. Sam radioed again. "Hurry up, the kid's moving towards the road."

Cars sped by.

The kid held onto his shirt and didn't look up—only a few feet away from the street. Look up, kid. Sam's heels began to beat against the carpeted floors. Look up. The boy strolled, crossing one foot over the other, moving towards the streaming traffic in a zigzag. The distance between those petite feet and the street shrank and shrank again. The boy was at the edge now, one moment from falling on his face on the asphalt and getting slammed by a car.

The boy stepped.

Sam stood up, hands slapping against the counter in front of him.

Then, out of the screen's corner, an officer, holding out his hand, moving his lips in the way of a shout. The child stopped at the sidewalk's edge, and looked up at the bobby. The officer grabbed ahold of the missing child and took him back to his parents who lived two districts over.

We strolled for a good deal longer. The sidewalks were cracked, and the houses we passed had quaint gardens, purple asters and tie-dyed Sweet Williams encased in soft green cabbage borders. It was quiet for a Saturday, but the boys assured me that down the road there would be pubs. Plenty of people in them, they said. I believed them and followed the boys down the narrow road between buildings.

“What's that?” I asked, pointing to a large stone with a plaque cemented on the ground beside it.

Walker stepped up to it and read the sign. “Well, aren't you lucky! You found the oldest boundary rock in Wycombe.” **Wycombe Wonder #5: The Oldest Boundary Rock in Wycombe.**

“Well, I’ll be,” I said. We all looked at the rock, too small to be a boulder or anything. It was just round and kind of lumpy. Like a rock. It wasn’t intimidating at all. If I wanted to extend my land a little, and I saw this rock, I think I would ignore it—or move it. They ought to have made it into something scary. Colossus of Rhodes, for example—now that’s a pee in your pants-er. Legs firm apart, 107 feet high, Colossus of Rhodes stood to remind Antigonus I Monophthalmus of Cyprus that Rhodes could not be invaded. I looked at the little rock. Well, maybe the people that bordered Wycombe were easily frightened, or maybe Wycombe had a kind of bad-ass reputation that didn’t need any help to deter those who might infringe. Or maybe they were just some peace-loving people who were cool with it, if you happened to step over the line—or stone.

Sam was pulling another all-nighter. He was ready for his day off. It was hard not to fall asleep when the rest of the world seemed to be shutting their eyes. He took a sip of his coffee. The lack of activity made his job even more difficult. There was hardly anyone on the screens. The clubs had all been shot almost an hour ago. Even the last-callers filtered out. The one lonely light glowing on the strip came from a greasy fried chicken shop next to a bus stop booth. There was a small crowd left loitering in front of the restaurant—a crew of kids who frequented the police station, though tonight seemed pretty low-key. They slapped at each other with slow, drunk movements. They took large mouthfuls of chicken and threw the bones at each other. Sam’s eyes fluttered with sleepiness as he watched them. A dark VW Golf rounded the corner of the empty street. It sped up as it approached the crowd, faster and faster. It lurched towards the curb. And then, the man behind the wheel rammed the car up an entire foot, pushing it onto the

sidewalk. The Golf dove into the streams of running legs and flailing arms. The car cruised right between the bus stop and the chicken shop, heading straight for a single man in-between.

Sam scrambled for the radio.

As the car closed in and its lights shone, the targeted man looked as if he were in the spotlight. He stood there, shaking, until he went horizontal underneath the car, two thumps, front and back wheels. The car zoomed back onto the road and right onto the motorway that led to London. The ambulance lights swirled on the screen. EMTs ran outside and pulled the half-torn man onto a stretcher.

Sam would later learn the run-over man suffered a punctured lung among other things, but survived. The victim refused to identify the driver, though they'd picked the aggressor up in the city the next day. Either he feared harsher physical repercussions, or he had his own skeletons.

We stopped at a convenience store. It was small and normal, except everything had a different name: Scotch Tape was Cello Tape, Hershey's was Kinder, and Lay's potato chips were Walkers potato crisps. The boys bought one beer each, and I bought a cider. Actually, they bought it for me—being English gentlemen and all.

While we walked the quiet Saturday streets on the way to the pub, I enjoyed Wycombe's best quirk, the lack of an open container law. We walked slowly, slugging our drinks with each step. Sam pointed out something hovering over a house in the distance. **Wycombe Wonder #6: Flying Lanterns.**

Three cream papered lanterns, fueled by fire, lifted into the silent sky. We followed them like the ships that followed the fire burning in the Lighthouse of Alexandria. We strolled forth, gazing up at them and slurping our drinks like sailors. We were mariners at night, letting the fire guide us.

Sam tried to take a picture, for my memories, to put into a scrapbook I'd look at when I turned old and ancient. It didn't work though; the lanterns just turned into a few white specks on an ocean of black, fading away.

It was another night shift in the screen room. Sam watched as people cruised in and out of clubs and pubs, most with a drink still in their hands for the walk from one to the other. People whipped past each other, signaling and opening their mouths wide, shouting. A guy with a heavy criminal record walked out of a pub in the middle of High Street. Sam's eyes followed the man up the street, watching him covertly navigate the sidewalk in a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up. Sam smirked—like the guy could really hide from the cameras. He might as well get in his invisible Harry Potter cape. Sam could spot the man anywhere for all the trouble he caused, hood or not.

The hooded man paused at a store. Outside of it, a guy who'd had too much to drink sat with his head between his knees. The criminal crouched and spoke to the drunk. The drunk produced a phone and a wallet, and the criminal simply took the goods and walked off down the street. Sam radioed the police, and within a minute they were there on his screen. "North," Sam told them, "He went North." The uniformed men broke into a run. "That's the way. You're right behind him." They were gaining on the hooded man, only a block away. The hood made a sharp

turn. “Left,” instructed Sam, “He turned left.” The coppers followed Sam’s words, letting him guide them. Sam took them across streets, over intersections, and around corners, until the man disappeared into a dark doorway, and the police ran right past. “Stop, stop! Turn around; he was in the doorway on your left.” Around they went. Half of them turned directly around, and the other half ran behind the block a ways and back up the street to greet the guy at the opposite end. Both teams zoned in on the doorway. The hood stepped out, ran one way, saw the coppers, turned, and ran the other way, only to meet more bobbies.

Bugs Bunny tricks do not work in a world with cameras—not in a world where Sams are watching over you.

The next day (after we did, eventually, find a couple of bars), Sam and Mike had band practice, and Henry was visiting his parents as he did every Sunday. Walker had plans with his parents too—an English custom it seemed—but he canceled them to show me around town. First, he escorted me to the mall, which was an ugly new outlet mall that neither of us liked. It was no Wycombe wonder.

He gathered that I’d rather be outside—contrary to popular belief it does not rain every day in Britain—and took me to a park instead. There were oak, lime, yew, ash, whitebeam, field maple and sycamore trees, and even a thin line of water called the River Wye where a few swans swam around in circles. I asked Walker if it felt odd airbrushing porn with his father, but he didn’t seem to mind it. Maybe the Brits are slightly less Puritan than their American friends. Sam, who worked as a security camera man, told me he saw people have sex in this park all the time.

Wycombe Wonder #7: Security Cameras. Cameras are everywhere in Wycombe. On every street, in every park, in every neighborhood. We even spotted one the night before. There it was, a big pole in the middle of the public sidewalk. It seemed to have no function. I stopped in front of it wondering what the pole could be, if not a light pole. “Why do you have poles coming out of your sidewalks?” I asked.

Sam rolled his eyes at me. “Security, of course.”

“What?”

“You know, public security cameras. To make sure everyone behaves like good little children.”

I looked up at the camera, appalled that I was at this moment being watched. “Horrible.”

Sam elbowed me in the ribs. “Horrible or not, it provides me with my wages. Besides, just yesterday I found a missing person. He may have been a drunk, but still, I found him.”

It felt eerie and very much like the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. Artemis was the mother of wild things and (unlike the Greek Diana) fertility. She would have a fond heart for us drunks on the street and the exhibitionists of the park. From Artemis’s temple, she watched over the people of Turkey, watched them hunt for both animals and each other. Sam sat in the security room and, like Artemis, looked out for wild behavior. In Great Britain there is no such thing as privacy in public. In ancient Ephesus there was no such thing as privacy—in your home or out of it.

I wondered who was watching Walker and me as we strolled through the green grass. It was soft, thin grass that waved in the breeze. I saluted to the next camera we walked by. I knew it wasn’t Sam looking back at me, but I imagined it was.

It was seven o'clock in the morning. Things on the CCTO screen looked pretty humdrum. The rat race, so to speak. Lots of watch checking and coffee juggling, suits and slacks. The nine-story car park in the city center was filling up quickly. People left their vehicles and walked to the elevators in clumps—except for one man. He seemed about fifty, in a white button-up and black suit like all the others. Instead of following the crowd, he walked to the edge of the car park and climbed over the knee-high cement wall.

Back in the CCTO room, another radio to the police rang out.

On the screen, the suited man stood on the ledge, nine floors up, facing out, as if he was waiting for something. Bobbies filtered in on the sidewalk below, trying to talk him down. They cupped their hands to their mouths and shouted. No one thought to bring a megaphone. There was a guy whose job it was to do this, a specialist negotiator, but the morning traffic slowed him down, and it wasn't as if the the man on the ledge was going to wait. The ambulance didn't have the same difficulty; the hospital was closer, and it was on the screen in seconds. The sirens pooled their lights over the camera, and the scene played out in flashing colors.

The man on the ledge shook his head.

His knees bent.

Sam squeezed his armrests.

Heels scraped against the concrete.

This was it.

No; he fell backwards—the police making some sense to him at the last second.

Sam sighed.

Wait.

The man's head shook again.

Bent knees.

A fall.

A beautiful, vertical fall.

Sam opened his mouth to scream, but a silent ache was all he could manage.

The man went down, wind whipping up his jacket in a flurry of freedom. A moment. And then the crash. Feet first, the man crumbled onto the sidewalk cement. Men spurted out of the ambulance, gathering around him, working together to peel his mangled flesh from the cracks in the sidewalk.

He survived. He completely shattered his feet, ankles, and wrists, broke his leg, and cut his head, but he was alive. The man would have some physical suffering to complement the emotional suffering he must already be plagued with. He survived.

Sam wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

When it came time to leave Wycombe, Mike insisted we take a picture to commemorate the experience. We all walked into the backyard, careful not to step on the grass. Mike set up the camera on a tripod with a timer. He was a big fan of timed pictures. "Alright gang, on three we jump."

1—2—3

We held hands and sprung upward, like the flying lanterns, only faster and clumsier. I might have accidentally come down on some grass. Mike went back to his camera to survey the picture. His jokester smile disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “No good?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “No, it’s good, but now you’ve got to leave.”

Wycombe Wonder #8: These Boys. There is no expressly stated eighth wonder of the world, but maybe that’s where Wycombe trumps the ancients. I hugged all the boys goodbye. I thanked Mike for the legal grass. I thanked Henry for the building that was quite old. I thanked Walker for the boundary rock.

Sam shuttled me back to the station, past the green hills, past the large colonial houses, and over the second largest retaining wall in Europe. We pulled into the parking lot and before I got out of the car, I thanked Sam for Wycombe.

The morning sun was young as Sam sat at the chair, itching for his last ten minutes of work to be done. He longed for his down comforter, for his two soft feathery pillows. It was all he could do to keep his eyes open. He drummed his hands on the chair to stay awake and darted his eyes from screen to screen, scene to scene. People, the ever present floods of people, walked the streets. Despite the early hour, the shopping center was booming, the Wycombe citizens flowing in and out of shops, buying sweaters and scarfs for the cold, windy weather. The masses were bundled. Except—

Sam zoomed in on a roundly built woman, seemingly aimless, wandering around the middle of the shopping center. She wore a white, see-through pajama dress—no sleeves, just tiny

straps. She looked to be Sam's age, somewhere in her mid-twenties. There was something wrong with her hands. Sam zoomed in again. Blood poured from her wrists to her fingers. Sam saw now that it was seeping into her nightgown, dripping onto the floor. He picked up the radio.

The door to the CCTO room opened. It was time for the shift change. Sam gestured to the blood on the screen and walked out of the room. He pushed his way out of the unmarked building, out into the shocking Wycombe sun. He was out of other people's lives, yet now he walked among them. Sam stumbled over to his car, ignoring the cameras, wishing for sleep, for a way to wash them all away.

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

The car rumbled over the brick road as Dusty rounded the corner to our new home. I'd been studying in Cambridge for six weeks, and while I was away, Dusty moved our things from a house of three couples on the east side of Orlando to a downtown house of five twenty-somethings—all boys except me. Dusty flicked his cigarette out the car window before pulling into the hidden drive. Before I'd left, he'd cut down to one a day. But this new house was a beacon of temptation. It was a house that always had company—and whiskey and weed. A friend once described it as a gas station, a place where people popped by all day and all night. We, ourselves, used to be visitors to the house. A friend of ours moved out to live with his girlfriend, and we were taking his room.

It was dark, and Dusty led me up the wooden deck to the backdoor, the one that led to the kitchen. When we walked in, suitcases dragging behind us, I could see the place was still booming. One of my new roommates sat on the black granite countertop, taking shots from a bottle of Kentucky Gentleman and passing it to a round of boys. I gave hugs all around and continued through the walkway (the music recording studio), to the living room where another roommate circled a blunt—the large green couches seeping in smoke. More people congregated in the Florida room, lifting cigarettes and bottled beers to their lips. The PlayStation 3 was on. The NES was on. The record player was on, electronic pop pulsing through the house. It was the scene I'd expected. I said hello as quickly as I could, eager to get upstairs—out of the chaos—and drop my bags.

I followed Dusty up the steps to our room. It was like a mini apartment, which was the pitch Dusty used to convince me to move in. Fed up with roommates, I wanted to have a place

that was just us. But the apartment I hoped for fell through, and this place was available. Part of me understood this was the most convenient option. The other part of me knew Dusty hadn't been ready to play house just yet—we'd only been together for a couple of years. The room was split in two by a cement partition. One side displayed our bed and a fireplace that didn't work. The other side had fishbowl windows and our television. The wood floors dipped in the corner by my desk, tilting it so the papers on top slid to the left. All the walls were bare with the exception of an Arnold Schwarzenegger *Commando* poster in our private, adjoining bathroom.

“Do you like it? I fit all of your clothes in the closet,” Dusty said, chin up as he showed off his housekeeping skills. In our last place, I had a huge walk-in closet, enough space for absolutely everything I might need. Here, Dusty and I split a shower curtain rod. It was impressive that he managed to stuff it all in, but that's exactly what it was, stuffed, jammed together so there was no way you could skim through the clothing. You just had reach in, grab a hanger and hope for the best with whatever came out, but I nodded and tried to smile. I could hear the laughter and shouting from the kitchen, living room, and Florida room coming up through the floors. The house was built in the 1920s, and the walls were thin. But there was a bed, and there was Dusty, and this place would have to be home.

A couple of weeks into my study abroad trip, I sat at the desk in my Cambridge dorm room talking to Dusty on Skype. I felt I was looking into an alternate universe, one that was something like the home I'd left, but not quite. Dusty had cut his own hair with the help of whiskey and garden shears. His long, shoulder-length curls lopped off and replaced with bald spots. Around him, our house had changed too. The walls were stripped, and half of our things

were stuffed into boxes. It was so odd to see it like that, to not be there for the transition. Instead, I was far away in a tiny dorm room with slanted ceilings, a big wooden desk, a full bookshelf, and a construction scaffold I could crawl onto from the window—my own personal balcony.

We drank wine, and I told him about my Victorian Novels class and punting down the River Cam. He told me about packing issues and snarky notes from roommates that said things like: *Take out the trash you fucking assholes*. But throughout our conversation, I couldn't help think that while I was here, my life at home was changing. I knew before I left that I'd be moving, but it was one thing to know, and another thing to see it done. I'd moved three times in the past three years and the undressing of the house seemed like a ritual I was giving up. I needed a breath, a moment of transition. It wasn't that I didn't want to leave that house. The roommate troubles Dusty relayed had been building for some time. But the dreamy apartment I'd picked out, the one with the pastel walls and the octagonal rooms, the one that looked like a treehouse, was not the place we'd be moving into. I didn't want the animal house. I wanted the honeymoon apartment.

I tried to shake these thoughts from my head and concentrate on our "date." Dusty had terrible communication skills, and I was lucky to have him on the line.

"Baby, is our door open?" I asked. He nodded. I told him to close it and gulped from my 1.5 liter of wine.

The day after I returned to Orlando from Cambridge, my alarm rang at eight o'clock in the morning. I didn't have much time to settle into the animal house. I was a baton twirler for my university's marching band, and we had a two-week long bootcamp before the semester

started—nine o'clock in the morning till ten o'clock at night. I dragged myself out of bed and pulled on some workout clothes. The house was finally quiet. I wished I could crawl back into those covers and wake naturally. Instead, I kissed Dusty's lips, savored his morning breath, and left.

The ride to school was long. Our last house had been a mere five minutes away, but this summer it would take me forty-five minutes to an hour to make the trek. It didn't help that I had to be at the practice field at the same time most people clocked into work. My SUV was hard to keep between the lines. I was a shaky driver when I left for England, and I hadn't been in a car at all while in Cambridge. The slightest turn of my hand pulled me to the lane lines. The *thump thump thump* of reflectors vibrated under my seat. I changed to the right lane, and a horn shot through my eardrum.

When I made it to the field, the August heat and humidity practically melted me into the grass. The drum major addressed us all, hundreds of students standing at attention on the field. He talked of dedication and priorities, and I realized that the field, not the animal house, would be my home for the next two weeks. Each day, instead of waking up with Dusty and exploring downtown, I would kill myself on that field. My baton was my boyfriend and the freshly mowed grass our bed.

The day began with group stretches, and then separated into sectionals. The majorette captain stood in front of us twirlers and demonstrated a count of eight in the routine. We repeated that eight until memorized, and then she demonstrated another one, and so the cycle went. After that, it was field drills with the rest of the band. I learned to march heel to toe. I learned to march backwards. I learned to march at a diagonal while keeping my shoulders square. Next came

formations. Hours of standing still on my dot, so the band director could perfect our placements. We practiced marching from one dot to the next. Back and forth, back and forth, we marched. After lunch, the twirlers had the privilege of gym time. We worked on tricks. *Pull up one-two, toss three*, a phrase repeated over and over. I flung my body round and round, until we were back on the field going over our dots for a second time, now with the music, now with the baton routine we'd drilled that morning. At ten o'clock, it was over, and I wished for a different home.

On the car ride back, I felt a thick, crusted layer of sweat over my skin and my clothes too. I cranked the AC. Again, I heard the *thump thump thump* of the reflectors. When I finally returned to the animal house, Dusty met me with a bowl of spaghetti and a napkin of garlic bread. We moved through the chatter and whiskey up to our room. I ate quickly.

When I was done, Dusty kissed my salted shoulder. My body ached, but it reacted to his touch, and so I fell down with him onto the wood floor, the sensitive skin of my face scratching red from rubbing against the rough stubble of his chin. When we finished, I went to the bathroom to wash up for another thirteen hours of sweat. I longed for the large Whirlpool tub of our last home, a steamy bath to soak my throbbing muscles. Instead, I stepped into a tiny gray tub with a ring around the rim. Dusty had attacked it with bleach, but the stains were un-scrubbable. I settled for a cold shower. When I came out, Dusty was in bed. He pulled me close to him, and I fell asleep with his breath on my neck.

Before I left for England, I woke every morning at nine o'clock to practice outside in preparation for twirler tryouts. I would tape my hands because they blistered and bled from the constant rubbing of the metal, grab my three batons, and head to the cement slab—aka the

patio—in our backyard. The slab was perfect. It was even throughout and large enough for me to move around as if it were a stage. I also appreciated the privacy of the high wooden fence, so I wouldn't be embarrassed by my pitiful warm ups. I began practice with one baton, moved on to two, and finished with three. I'd catch ten of every trick in my try-out routine before I ran through the whole thing with counts. After some time, I'd feel comfortable enough to do it with the fast-paced theme song of Cowboy Bebop, a big band swing that left me panting for air. Before I broke for the day, I always walked back inside to my bedroom, woke Dusty up, and led him outdoors to watch me. I liked an audience for the finished product. He would clap when I finished, sleep still in his eyes. But when I gathered my batons to walk back inside, instead of going to the kitchen for coffee, he would follow me into the large bathroom. I loved that bathroom with its foggy glass blocks that acted as a window and softened sunlight, the pristine his-and-her-sinks, and the extra large Whirlpool—especially the Whirlpool. I would hold Dusty's hand as we dipped into the tub and sigh as he licked the sweat off my collarbone.

During the second week of band camp, I came home and had to park across the street, our hidden driveway full of cars. All I wanted was quiet, but I knew the screams and laughter would be here till six o'clock in the morning, or maybe even later. One night, I woke to find people snorting coke off the coffee table. I wanted out, badly, which was sad, because the house did have its perks. It had a gas stove, a huge refrigerator, and a large backyard full of oaks and hanging moss. My roommates were close enough friends to be comfortable with and not so close that tiffs were taken personally. Actually, aside from the mess (beer bottles and ash galore), the house would have sufficed if it had not been for my dreams of the honeymoon apartment and my

workload, a workload I knew wasn't going to change much once the semester started. Adding nine hours of weekly practice and all day Saturday performances to a full academic schedule would be a bootcamp of its own.

I walked up to the crowded Florida room. It was filled with boys trying to beat Adventure Island on NES. I could understand getting invested in the Playstation 3. The Playstation 3 had games that were visually appealing with real characters and story lines. Adventure Island was not so—more like a lesser version of Mario Bros. But the boys, evidently, did not think so. The night before, Dusty refused to come to bed, going on a fourteen-hour marathon to beat the game. He didn't succeed. Tonight, everyone tried their hand at it. I walked in front of the television and made my way to the kitchen where Dusty stood in a circle swigging whiskey.

“Any dinner?” I asked.

“Ate out,” he answered, barely looking at me. His thick dark eyebrows came together on his forehead. He was trying to think of an actor in *Cape Fear* for “the movie game.”

I nodded. It was an answer I'd expected. Dusty hadn't always been my personal chef. We tended to go through stages. When he worked a lot, I'd take over. When I was slammed with school work, he'd pick up the role. But that system no longer applied. Dusty was bitter and so was I. I saw myself as having only one hour of free time, an hour I wanted to spend with him. But he felt neglected. In his eyes, I only *allowed* him one hour, an hour when all his friends could be found downstairs. Besides, that hour had become less fun for the both of us. I hadn't much to say that pertained to anything outside of baton, and as each day hit, my body had more trouble mustering up the energy for sex. So, instead of a bowl of spaghetti and an orgasm, I got a granola bar and sleep. I didn't have the will to make anything for dinner, not even a sandwich,

and to stop on the way home would have meant more time in the car. The granola bar would do. I refilled my water bottle, which was more like a mini-keg, and stuck it in the freezer. It would melt on the practice field in only a few minutes.

I jumped in the shower and washed myself mechanically. Everything felt mechanical in those days. Structured mornings and structured nights. The worst part was that there was no place to escape to. I brushed my teeth, picked out my clothing for the next day, and set my alarm—just like clockwork. Finally holed up under the covers, my wet hair and the AC chilled me. The sheets weren't enough to make me warm, only a body could do that. I'd had busy stretches before, but it was different this time, worse. Before, I'd been comfortable in my home—Dusty and I had been comfortable with each other. I hadn't had time to settle into this house, and we hadn't had time to reconnect. Dusty's laugh traveled up to me from the kitchen, and I rubbed my scratched chin, which had begun to heal, into the pillow. I missed our old house. We threw a few big bashes, but other nights were quiet. Dusty and I went to bed at the same time back then. I'd fall asleep with his skin against my back. A soft television seeping in from the other room.

In Cambridge, I had a groove. I'd adapted quickly and well with a good balance of play and work. I'd read the required reading ahead of time, so when class was over, all I had to do was skim through the next day's notes before dinner. Sometimes I attended the night lecture, sometimes I hosted mini-parties in my room. I made a whole new set of friends. We latched onto each other like college freshman, embracing our new homes and each other. We went punting. We drank at pubs. We laughed on my scaffold balcony.

One night, I kept my door open, and one by one, they trickled in: Kelly, the only English one among us; Biology, our resident scientist; Bryce, the quiet poet; Jessica, our eager youngster; laid back Shayna; clean-cut Michigan; and wonderfully flamboyant Holland. My wine was open to whoever wanted it, and Kelly made us tea, so we could feel British. I lit a celebratory cigar with my toaster and ducked out onto my scaffold. As I sat outside, talking and looking up at the stars, I felt at home. It was strange to feel that way when I was so far away from my family, so far away from my friends, and so far away from Dusty—but I really did. I had a group who knew they could drop by whenever they wanted. I had my regular cafe, my regular deli, my favorite shopping strip, my favorite vendors at the farmers' market. I felt like I belonged in Cambridge.

Later, when I got back to Orlando, I didn't adapt so well downtown. I was always on the east side, by my university, by my old house. I didn't know how to get to Central Avenue, the main downtown road. For months I did all my errands by my university because there, I knew where the Target was, the Publix, the Walgreens. I'd spent so much time away from the downtown house, that I never had a chance to settle into it. The walls remained bare until after band camp. I hardly saw any of my friends, or Dusty. I didn't feel like I belonged there. I missed Cambridge—the feeling of home, the sense of ease. I found more comfort in my dorm room in England than in my downtown room with Dusty.

When band camp finally finished, I had a moment to catch my breath before the semester began. The bedroom walls filled with mirrors and a poster of Peru. Knick-knacks found their way to the desk. I hung a wind chime from the ceiling. Dusty and I planned a date night at the house. The place was so foreign to me, it was almost like going out. I dimmed the lights and lit

candles around the room. I poured our wine into actual glasses. I put makeup over my scabbed chin and a skin tight, black dress over lace lingerie. Miles Davis serenaded us with his trumpet.

I perched on the arm of the couch—on the television side—and handed Dusty his glass of wine. He, too, had dressed up for our night a la bedroom. He wore a dark button down and his black jeans, the nicest outfit he owned.

“Hello. It’s been a while.” I pulled him toward me.

Dusty lifted his hand to my cheek. “It has,” he said, and I felt the stiff touch of his guitar calloused fingers. As he leaned in to kiss me, a burst of laughter came from downstairs. Dusty’s eyes darted towards the door. He paused and strained a smile.

He had found his own Cambridge—the new house minus me. He’d lived there for over a month before I’d come back, and when I’d arrived, the truth was I hadn’t really. He found comfort downstairs with the boys. With the NES. With the whiskey and cigarettes. He didn’t want to be closed off upstairs, watching a black and white movie and making out. At our last house, we would go on dates to escape from work and monotony, but now, for him, that escape lurked downstairs. And where was my escape? Miles away across the ocean. Dusty kissed me again, but he didn’t linger over my lips, his fingers didn’t rub my earlobe, his eyes opened quickly. There was a time when I always opened mine first.

II. FAMILY ON THE RUN

A HISTORY OF RIVERS AND ROCKS

I woke to a pillow that smelled of dry dust. Strange voices chatted over the clanging of pots and pans. The inflatable bed rocked with my weight as I sat up and stretched, and I took a moment to let my mind surface from the fog of sleep. This was Honduras, I remembered, and I was visiting my father's side of the family. With crust still in my eyes, I shuffled down the hall to the bathroom, hoping not to run into anyone. We were at my aunt's house, but she was a stranger to me. So were my cousins. And so was my grandmother. The door was cracked, so I pushed it open wide. There, on the toilet seat, rested Grandma Maja, her head on her shoulder and drool gently dripping down onto her chin. Her hair clouded over her shoulders, transparent as a veil. The nightgown she wore was thin, chosen to help her withstand the Central American heat, and I could see through it. I gripped the doorframe, unsure if I should wake her. I felt guilty, like trespasser.

At that age, about the only thing I knew of my father's mother was that she used to live in a coastal village called Balfate. She'd lived there with her husband, and when he died, my aunt moved in. Recently, they had relocated an hour west to the city of La Ceiba because it was closer to the hospital—a place my grandmother went to more and more since she started falling asleep on the toilet and going to the bathroom in her bed. She used to be intimidating, my mother said. The first time my mom met her, my grandmother was riding bareback on a horse, free hair flowing, waving, and all teeth. She grew up wild in the American Midwest and toughened up in the Eastern cities. In her twenties, she forged a diploma and became an editor for *Parents Magazine*. Before I came around, before the stroke, she was a mare unbroken. Now, she sat on

the toilet seat in her cotton pajama dress, drool hanging off her lip. I closed the door and went to find my father.

I discovered him in the kitchen with everyone else. I was always a late riser, and so it was no surprise to me that everyone should be dressed and waiting. At the table sat my cousins Soen and Raina. They were older than me, both teenagers. Close and best friends, just like me and my cousin on my mother's side back home—both of us six going on seven. My mother and father ate scrambled eggs on opposite sides of the table, and my older brother, Kale, did not care to sit down. He paced while he ate, always on the go—our pediatrician confined him to a straight jacket on several occasions as it was the only way to keep him still. My Aunt Johanna and her maid, Ana, scurried around the big wooden table, bare feet slapping the stone tile, dishing out more bacon for the late-comers. I took a seat beside my father and whispered to him my experience in the bathroom. He stood up quickly, the chair scraping the floor so hard that everyone looked as he made his exit. My mother shrugged and scooped some of his eggs onto my plate. No one asked what was wrong. I think they knew.

Before long, I was dressed, and a group of us went out on a riverbed hike. Soen, Raina, Kale, Mom, Dad, and I would brave nature, while my aunt, grandmother, and Ana stayed behind. Soen was designated Group Leader. I'd never been hiking before, and I feared snakes and spiders—with good reason. The spiders there had legs as thick as my pinky finger. But Soen was strong and confident. His black hair and dark eyes gave him the look of an Aztec warrior. He kicked big sticks out of the way and pointed out webs to me. Raina walked beside Soen, her freshly bleached Keds getting dirtier by the second. Kale trailed close in their wake. Being nearer in age, he saw their teenagerness as something anticipated and attainable, whereas I did not. I felt

uncomfortable with the two of them, their age to be admired from afar. My parents crawled behind me, bringing up the rear safely, patient with my little limbs.

Palms sprouted up between bushy trees. Roots crawled over rocks. I looked up at the cracks of light between leaves, but every time I did, I tripped on the uneven flooring. After a while, I gave up on the scenery and watched Soen. It was strange trusting this cousin whom I did not know in such a wild place. We were supposed to have faith in him to lead us the right way, to make sure this path was okay for people as small as me to walk on. It was a lot to trust a stranger with—a teenaged stranger. At home, in Florida, I saw my cousins on my mother's side multiple times a week. They were more like siblings than extended family, but here my cousins were not so familiar. Later, I would get to know my Aunt Johanna a little better with a trip to the Guatemalan ruins. We would walk and walk and walk, up and up, until both she and I sat on a step, steeped in sweat, refusing to go any further whatever my dad's pleas. We were united in protest. Later that night, I swam off the sweat with her in the hotel pool. Now, though, I walked up and up the path, following her son, Soen. The big man. The big guy. My big cousin. Who I was trying to trust. Even my parents seemed cautious and a little nervous, especially my father who would point out all of the webs, though Soen already had.

Soon after this river hike, Soen visited us a couple Christmases in a row. It would appear that he was becoming like real family, family like on my mom's side, family that I saw on a semi-regular basis, even if it was only twice a year. We'd visit him in Honduras during the summer, and he'd visit us in Florida for the holidays. The year I turned ten, we were invited to Soen's wedding. I thought of waterfalls and palm trees and mountains, but when I got there, it was only heat, a ceremony, and my father's sky blue shirt soaked to navy. I loved Soen's new

wife. She taught me a dot/square game that passed time on the plane ride home. She had long brown curls and painted nails with jewels on them. She was glamorous. I wore a white dress to the wedding. No one told me it was wrong.

And then there was a split. Nobody said why. We had Soen and his new wife for one more Christmas, and then they disappeared. I asked my father if we would ever visit him, since he never visited us. I was told Soen's wife would rather we didn't. Soon, Soen stopped calling my father back and snubbed his own mother. I've never gotten a true explanation for this. I know Aunt Johanna asks my parents for money on occasion. I wonder if she'd started relying on her child. Or if it was one of those mother/daughter-in-law, possession-of-the-boy fights, and the anger extended toward the whole family. I don't know. I know that it was my parents who put him through college. And I know that every year for a long while we sent him a gift and a Christmas card and received nothing in return, not even a call. Soen was lost, and I'd only just begun to trust him.

When I turned eighteen, he appeared again. On our doorstep when I was home alone. I did not recognize him. Instead of a tuft of dark hair, he had a bare egg head that was white as anything because he was living in Philadelphia and not Honduras. He wore old man jeans. He wore a t-shirt. He asked to come in, and when I did not respond, he clarified: *It's Soen. Your cousin.* I opened the door wider. It was me who was the teenager now, and I did not know what to say to this man who was nothing like the tanned outdoorsy cousin who'd led me down the river path. This man looked like he sat at a desk. This was an old egg head man (and as I would later learn, a soon-to-be-divorcé). He stepped inside and gushed at the wallpaper. At the glass coffee table. *Nothing has changed.* But I looked at him, and I knew it had. We had little to talk

about. It seemed silly to bring up the hike of over a decade ago. Instead, we relied on the regular topics. *How is school? The weather has been so hot. What do you do for work?* I opened the fridge and asked him if he'd like a snack. He declined, and, again, we were left with nothing to talk about. After we'd chatted for a half-hour without saying anything, my father came home to save me. He recognized Soen immediately. He treated him like he never left. Perhaps I should have brought up the hike and the river and the clear, clear water.

That day, at six years old, is my greatest memory of Soen. We still do not see him, though I'm friends with him on Facebook. Because of that, I know he now runs marathons, I suppose as a way of retrieving bits of himself after the divorce—his way of getting back to that teenager who ran up the trail ahead of us just a little too fast. Every now and then on that trail, my parents had to call out to him to slow down—remind him of my little legs. When the path curved closer to the river, and we saw the water, I was surprised. I had expected it to be filled with algae. I expected it to be green and murky. The only fresh water I'd seen was swamp. But this water was nothing like the stuff you saw in the Everglades. It was so transparent, almost as if there was no water at all. If not for the sun sheen on top, I would have thought the trees parted for some kind of basin, a stretch of rock.

The only body of water I'd visited in Honduras before that had been the ocean. Back when Grandma Maja and Aunt Johanna still lived in Balfate, we would spend our time in the surf right outside of the raised house. I would pick up sand-dollars, and once one of my father's brothers—the only one I've ever met—relaxed in the sand while I searched. His name is Stephen, and he is an artist—like my grandfather who died before I could meet him. Stephen sketched me with a pen that worked as a paint brush. He made my curls livelier, but he didn't

have to exaggerate my smile. I was happy on the beach, and happy to pose, though he told me not to, to just sift through the sand as I usually would. When he was finished, he let me sign my name at the bottom of the drawing where the artist's signature usually goes. The pen was not an easy one to wield, and I smudged up the corner. He laughed, handed me the page, and told me it added character. I wonder if it's this sketch on my wall that keeps that memory alive, or if someone has told it to me. It seems so fresh, looking for sand-dollars. We visited Stephen in New York City a couple times after that. It's been longer than ten years since I saw him last—another one of the disappeared.

But before Stephen and Soen faded away, Soen led a group of Bernaths to the river and, what's more, to a fallen tree that crossed that river. The tree was so thick, it was like a bridge meant to be. So thick that as I walked across it, I had no fear of falling. Kale skipped ahead of me, and I knew that if he was brave, I could be too. I ran after him and heard my father call to me to slow down, but I didn't. I was a Bernath adventurer. I could feel the curve of the tree underneath my pounding feet. The thick air blew past my cheeks. When I reached Kale in the middle, Soen and Raina were pushing each other, daring one another to jump in.

We were high up. The dead, hanging branches did not reach the water. Soen stopped teasing Raina for a safety lesson. His chest puffed out, as if he were a man already. His voice took on an authoritative tone. He pointed to the sections of the water that were a light gray, gray because the stone under the surface was gray. Those, he said, were shallow areas and we had to be careful to avoid them if we jumped. I looked around. Most of the area was shallow. Soen pointed to a mass of black that was close to the tree. Black meant depth, he told us. If we wanted to jump, we could jump there. I gazed down at the water, the small stretch of black on the vast

gray. There was risk in the jump, and the way Soen talked about it, I knew he'd thrown himself off that tree many times before.

Soen gave Raina another push, and she screamed and held onto the tree. What spooked me even more than the precision required was what that depth meant. I'd seen *The Little Mermaid*, and I knew that just because there weren't any rocks didn't mean there weren't other things to be scared of. I didn't think Ursula was down there, but I knew enough to know that something sinister lurked where you couldn't see it. When I looked back up, my brother, Kale, had taken a couple of steps back. His heels rested as far on the edge of the trunk as they could be. Then he ran forward, as fast as his legs would let him with so few steps, and cannonballed into the clear glistening. Water shot up around him, and sprayed the rest of us on the tree. Soen smiled.

The branches and leaves that arched over our heads and the river below were reminiscent of my grandfather's paintings. He painted Honduran landscapes. He was a fan of watercolors and, also, of painting the water. Hanging in my living room are his impressions of wild flowers, of foggy mountains, of clouds like Grandma Maja's hair after the stroke.

My grandfather met Grandma Maja in an artist's colony in Taos. He was exotic, from Hungary. She was a midwestern kid with spunk. He'd followed his art to Taos, and she'd followed her family. They both belonged to the volunteer fire brigade, which from my understanding, was really just an assembly line of water pails. She was already passing the bucket as he tried to pull on muddy boots, and she laughed at his speed. He asked her out for coffee. I speculate that she was attracted to him because he fit a mold she knew. Two of her brothers were successful painters, and the one who was not had a framing business that catered

to the Taos community. My grandfather was older than her, but I don't think that mattered as she enjoyed being around creative men, maybe enjoyed being around creative people in general. From what I know, their courtship was happy at the beginning.

After a while, the Taos community crumbled with modernism, and the couple decided to try their hand on the eastern seaboard. I've been able to piece together parts of their story. They lived in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut—popping out four children in the process. Once, they lived above a post office, or a post shop as my father remembers it. The family was short on cash. Modernism crushed more than Taos, and my grandfather had trouble selling his work. He refused to lower himself and take a job as a draftsman, despite several offers. So, with four mouths to feed and enough strength in her to do it, Grandma Maja became the breadwinner and the caregiver. I like to think of her as the first woman of the nineties.

I suppose she must always have been good with words even if she didn't have the proper education. She wrote about what she knew. While she edited *Parents Magazine*, she came out with two books of her own, each one on bringing up children. These are facts I've only just uncovered. They were never offered up to me, I had to know to ask them. Some things I don't ask, though. Things I don't think my father would know. Whether my grandmother got into the business because she felt there was no choice, if she did it because she loved to write and edit, or if she believed so much in my grandfather's art that she wanted him to concentrate on that and that alone. But I can speculate, and I think it was the former.

Grandma Maja, apparently, escaped into the night with her children several times. She'd flee to her parents' house a couple states over in Rhode Island. A hilltop church, complete with a cemetery. The main hall was converted from a place of worship to an art studio, though they

opted to keep the twenty-foot sculpture of Christ on the cross. It didn't matter that they weren't religious. It was beautiful, and they appreciated it. How my father feared that sculpture but had no qualms about playing with his toy cars in the graveyard baffles me. It seems to me they had quite the perfect, odd life in Rhode Island, but Maja always went back, and what did that mean? And why did they move to Honduras? This is my history emerging. Vague, but a beginning. Now, I know of a real man who painted and a real woman who wore herself out before her granddaughter was six. I take the scraps of stories my father parcels out. I Google my last name on the internet. Who was this woman who worked so hard early in life that by the time I came into the picture, she had no other option but to stay at home while we hiked and stood on trees?

After watching Kale take the plunge, I felt my confidence level rise. If he could do it, so could I. Besides, Soen said it was safe. I didn't get as much of a head start as Kale did. I began in the middle of the trunk, gripping the bark with my water shoes. I looked out to Kale before pushing off—he smiled up at me and I leapt, my limbs flailing in thick Honduran air. I careened toward the black spot, the spot that held creatures like Ursula. I prayed to God for no water snakes. I prayed to God I'd miss the gray stones. My parents didn't believe in God, but I did. Just in case he couldn't hear me, though, right before I fell, I tucked my legs underneath my bottom. My skin slapped against the cold river water, and I sank down into the darkness. The water was so cold, much colder than I anticipated. I thought it would be like home, where the August sun cooked the Florida saltwater to bathtub temperatures. Surely nothing could live in a place this freezing, not even water snakes. I scooped my hands through the water and pushed my body up. My head broke the surface, and I gasped for air. I could hear my father shouting at me as I swam, shivering, over to the gray part of the river by my brother, so I could rest on the rocks as I waited

for Dad and everyone else to come down and play. I wondered how we would get back up to the trail. There seemed to be no way back to the tree. But before I could call up and ask, my father was jumping and yelling at the same time, splashing and calling mine and Kale's names. My mom shook her head from the tree bridge and Soen and Raina fell into each other laughing. My mother came down, and Soen followed her. Raina was the last to jump.

Raina is Stephen's, the sketch artist's, daughter. She's a creative mind in her own way. She can make something out of anything. She came to our house once and made apricot syrup on a whim. She lives in California now, chose the other sunshine state—all the Bernaths so spread out, as if we never intended on seeing much of one another at all. Raina opted out of college, but her knowledge is expansive. Every time I meet her (experiences I can count on one hand), she enlightens me in some way. For instance, right before the river hike, she showed me what happens when you mix bleach and sneakers together—extremely white shoes with a slight hole from being left in a tad too long. On the tree, she took off her shoes before she jumped. I wondered how she would get them back. Maybe she didn't care because of the hole. Then, we were all in the water, all Bernaths.

I was named Madison Strake Bernath. Strake for my mother's family and Bernath for my father's. The Strake came first in my name, and it did so in life too. It was how I identified myself and my family. Bernath was a distant genealogy for which I felt no strong relation. Recently, I found out it isn't only the people I've got feeble connections to, it's the name as well.

According to my father, our bloodline only acquired that last name three generations back. My father's grandfather, my great-grandfather, was illegitimate, born in a political scandal. A prominent (and married) Hungarian politician knocked up his mistress. He would not

recognize the child and soil his good name, but, as the story goes, he loved his mistress. Reputation meant everything. This woman, if not saved, would be forever tainted and shunned by the community. The politician—whose name we do not know—bribed a man named Bernath. If Bernath would marry his mistress, the politician would grant him a lucrative tanning factory.

He accepted.

Bernath was only the name of my great-grandmother's husband, not the father of her son. We are not really Bernaths. We are something else. Something lost. Maybe this is the reason our ties are so flimsy. Maybe this is why we have such a hard time holding ourselves together. Our name, the thing that binds us, is only a band-aid—and band-aids peel.

At six, I tried to connect to that name, to that side of the family, splashing in the cold, clear water, moving down the river with the current until we found a place that would bring us back to the trail. Again, Soen and Raina were in front. Kale, a braver specimen on land, was slower in the water and swam closer to me. My father and mother worked their way around all of us, keeping us as together as they could, pointing things out for us to investigate.

Ahead, my dad shouted my name. He'd found something. A rock split in two, one I could step inside of. I swam over and slipped into the crack. It wasn't a huge stone, but it was large enough that my six-year-old body was swallowed up inside it. I ran my fingers over the smooth surface. Maybe it was a clean break to begin with. Maybe the water had pounded it so many times that now it was even. I wondered what could have been strong enough to make that rock split.

I stood in the divide, the sunlight and my cousin's shouts creeping through the crack. It seemed right to me that it should be this way, that it should be split, even though the rocks

around it were whole. As I traced my finger over the rock's insides, I wondered what was under all the other layers. I wondered if it would look the same if it had been split another way. A stream of small fish zipped by my feet through to the other side. I could hear Raina and Soen splashing each other, laughing as I did with my favorite cousin.

I thought this trip was a turning point. I thought this trip marked the moment when we would really become family. That I was going to see them far more. But they fell away, and my father's side of the family is still as opaque as the deep black of the river, and only recently have I seen the slightest of cracks. The river trip remains my clearest memory of the Bernath side of my family, and it is twenty years old. Only because I asked the right questions did I learn of Grandma Maja's literary life. Of the hilltop church. Only through a Google search did I find that my grandfather's paintings were displayed at the Art Institute of Chicago. It was only this year that my father chose to tell me that my name is Bernath by happenstance. I'd like to search deeper, sift through the layers, ask the right questions. But my father is quiet about his family life—I suspect his father was too. And the World Wide Web will only take you so far. All the painter's bios repeat the same paragraph of facts. Grandma Maja is all but nonexistent in cyber space. But the hunt for my history will continue even if, right now, it feels like digging through stone.

BLACK COFFEE

I'm working a rare opening shift at Drunken Monkey Coffee Bar. It's still dark outside as Sam, the other barista, and I move through the store: starting up coffee pots, placing the pastries out for display, straightening the leaning tower of games cluttered by the back wall. It's rough work at twenty-two, when I like to stay up past four o'clock in the morning with my boyfriend and other roommates. I'm half awake. After we finish setting up, there are still a few minutes till we open. Sam switches on Sirius Radio and dials to the 90's channel. "Smells Like Teen Spirit" pumps out of the speakers as she heads to the back to gather spinach for her morning smoothie.

I opt for a latte. Placing the filter under the espresso grinder, I flip the switch fast so the grains come down nice and fine. I pack down the brown, dark-roasted powder with a circular weight before inserting the filter into the espresso machine. My zombie fingers find the button for double shot. I move down the counter to our mini-fridge and take out the almond milk because I like the sweet flavor. Then, I test the machine's frother. Water spurts out and turns to steam. I hold my milk under it until bubbles rise up, and the bottom of the metal cup is warm on my hand. I place a twelve ounce mug on the counter and slip in my espresso. With a spatula holding back the froth, I pour the steamed almond milk into the sun orange mug. When the milk about reaches the top, I fill the rest in with a swirl of foam. I don't believe there was a time when I detested the smooth and airy sip of a perfect cup of coffee in the morning.

The sound of giggles ricocheting off polished water glasses rattled the air at the annual baton twirling banquet. There were tables upon tables of preteen and teenaged girls eating mass-produced food, trying to look very grown up in sequined dresses and flat-ironed hair. The round

tables were cluttered with too much silverware, and conversation was hard to hear over the clanking forks. I sat at a table with my best friend, Desiree, and my cousins: Chase, Jenevieve, and Jillian, or as we called her, Jilly Bean.

Servers zipped around the tables dispensing coffee and tea to the parents of the room, smiling at us as they passed our table. I ate a slice of chocolate cake, the whipped cream dolloped on the side looking exactly the same as the butter dollop that came with our bread. I glanced up at Desiree who pointed her tiny snub nose towards the ceiling with an air of teenage maturity. She was, after all, a whole year older than me. She crossed the threshold into womanhood that March when she turned thirteen.

“I hate it when they *assume* I don’t want coffee, like you *have* to be a mom to like coffee.”

“Yeah,” I said, knitting my eyebrows together and pursing my lips in a way I thought was very much like someone who actually wanted to taste that stale-smelling liquid.

“Yeah,” Chase (the next oldest) repeated.

“Yeah,” said Jenevieve and Jillian, the sisters, in unison.

Desiree waved the waitress over and said in a flat and almost stern voice, “I would like some coffee, please.”

The rest of us anxiously reiterated this notion, and the server politely went around the table pouring coffee into our ceramic cups. Since Desiree refused both milk and sugar, saying she liked her coffee “black,” I did the same, and since I did the same, Chase did the same, and so did Jenevieve, and so did Jillian. The server sped off to the rest of the adult tables and left us to contemplate the steaming cups in front of us.

Desiree picked hers right up and blew on the surface knowingly. “What?” she asked when she looked up to eight big eyes resting on her next move. “You think I was just trying to be difficult? I *like* coffee.” She let her pouty lips rest on the cup’s edge and took a long, smooth sip, closing her eyes in bliss. “My Nana lets me drink coffee with her.” We all stared. “You guys do like coffee, don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course. I drink it in the morning with my dad sometimes.” This was a lie. I lectured my father every morning with, *You know an apple will give you twice as much energy as a cup of coffee.* Against my own advice, I held that scorching cup in front of my face and breathed in deeply. The steam touched the tip of my nose, and I blew on the dreaded drink in my best Desiree imitation. I held my breath and took the tiniest sip, wetting my lips on the surface. “See,” I said. “I like it too.”

Chase ran his hands through his straight brown hair, mussing it up in his stress, before braving his own cup. He took a much larger gulp than my own, and his eyes widened at the heat while his nose scrunched at the acrid taste. He left it at that. Jenevieve and Jilly Bean’s cups sat untouched. I continued my tiny sips in a grand effort of maturity, as if I liked it, as if it were no big deal, like I drank it all the time.

The arena booms with the University of Central Florida’s alma mater. Flashing cameras beam light down on my glittering graduation cap. I put my arms around the strangers and acquaintances next to me and belt out, *May loyalty and friendship / Within our hearts unite / And light the star to guide us / Ever upward in our flight.* I raise my hand, and point my finger in the air, as if this university will skyrocket me to success, dressed in the robes of black and gold. I’m

the only one who knows the words. The others sway silently. As we take our seats for the obligatory speeches, I let my mind wander over the gold tassels of those that sit in front of me to the questions I'm asked over and over again.

Example A:

Uncle: So, we're coming to your graduation! You must be excited to be done.

Me: Yeah, I'll be happy when all the paperwork's in.

Uncle: And what are your plans?

Me: Find a job, I guess.

Uncle: You have internship experience, right?

Me: Well, no.

Uncle: But you've been planning for the future.

Me: I've been going to school.

Uncle: So, you want to go into publishing?

Me: I don't know. I haven't really thought about it.

Everyone wants to know what's next on the big agenda. Where do you go from here? For years, though, there's been one thing on my agenda—school. Apparently, it's time to pave my way into the professional world, but I have no tools. No one even mentioned internships until halfway through my senior year. A student career is a short career, and when I walk out of the arena into the blinding sun, the only experience under my belt will be the college experience. I'm

a student, not a writer, not an editor. I accomplished a goal seventeen years in the making, but all I feel is empty. I decide to apply to graduate school.

After graduation, my mother takes me to buy two interview outfits for my new “career.” For the corporate-type jobs, a white Oxford shirt and black pencil skirt with a bow on the side for style; an emerald green wrap-dress for trendier, more creative places. My college email account gets the boot; fullname@gmail.com is my new identity. I update my resume, shoot it all over the web. The more I send out, the more I become acclimated to the possibility of becoming a professional. I start to dream of getting up early, wearing heels to work, sitting in boardrooms all day, health insurance benefits, adulthood. But Monster.com yields no results for an inexperienced twenty-two-year-old, and Craigslist keeps wanting me to accept money from foreign diplomats when I respond to job ads.

My dad grows impatient as a month goes by. The question of work turns into demand, and I stop calling home. I need to be more proactive, put myself out there, but how do you go about finding a writing job in person? If you want to be a server, you go into restaurants and ask if they’re hiring. Do I walk into Morgan and Morgan Law Firm and ask if they’re hiring copywriters? That can’t be proper professional etiquette. Why don’t they teach us these things in school? I opt for calling instead. I sit on the couch and gather a list of all the major businesses in the Orlando city center and work on my professional voice. I write down my questions and ask them into a recorder. Play it back. Do it again, try to sound older. When I feel my voice is deep enough, I begin making my way through the list.

Example B:

Secretary: Morgan and Morgan Law Firm. For the people. How can I help you today?

Me: Hello, I was wondering if you were hiring copywriters.

Secretary: I'm sorry, what?

Me: (reading off my notes) I'm looking for a job copywriting, and I was wondering if your company was in need of one.

Secretary: Um, hold on, let me check with marketing, I guess.

Muzak

Secretary: No, we're all set in that area.

Me: Tha-

-click-

-nks

As my boyfriend, Dusty, gets dressed for work one morning, I pull out my unused green dress. It is time to let it go, months have passed by. I will—work in retail. I spend the day in the florescent lighting that trademarks all malls, walking in and out of Bath and Body Works, FYE, and Express with my college degree. When I get home, I answer one more ad on Craigslist. It's a magazine, the *Central Florida Focus*, and I hope it will save me from stocking shower gel under a teenaged supervisor.

That night, I break down on Dusty's chest.

“You're supposed to get those stupid jobs in high school. Why am I right back where I started?”

He kisses my hair and massages my ear with his calloused fingers. “It’s temporary, lady. Something you’ll do while you write. Like me. I work at Jimmy Johns, but shoot me if I ever become a manager. Music’s mine like writing’s yours. Just because you got a shit job doesn’t mean you’re not working towards something better.” His arms tighten around me, and I let my tears fall on the espresso-colored hair of his forearm. “And hey, you still got grad school, right?”

“Yeah, if I get in anywhere.” In the panic of graduation, I rushed my applications and my writing samples. My growing stack of rejection letters tells me I should have waited.

Dusty recognizes that I need a treat, and so he drives me to a coffee shop called Drunken Monkey located right by our rented downtown house. After I graduated college I got into flavored lattes, so at the drive-through window I order the Tantric Mayan, which has notes of cinnamon and chocolate along with other goodies and spices. As Dusty reaches for my finished masterpiece from the barista, I notice a Help Wanted sign in the window. Dusty zooms up to the front of the store, and I run inside.

“I saw your sign,” I say to the tatted up barista, whom I will come to know as Sam. “I’d like to apply for the job.” She explains that they they have no applications on hand, but gives me the owner’s business card and suggests I shoot him an email. On the ride home Dusty turns down the music as I work on my email out loud. That night I can’t sleep, forming the words of my letter in my head. The next day I send out a message:

Dear Mr. Larry Hardin:

I am writing because as I was buying a latte last night I noticed a Help Wanted sign in the drive-through window and immediately came inside to inquire. I’m interested because the

Drunken Monkey is a place I could feel happy working at. I've applied to many depressing side-jobs and with each application I've felt a pang of dread knowing that if hired the better half of my day would be spent in those God-forsaken places. When I saw the sign at Drunken Monkey my heart felt a wash of relief. Here I would be surrounded by my three favorite things: coffee, sandwiches, and good people.

Drunken Money and *Central Florida Focus* magazine schedule me for interviews on the same day. So, after a half hour of fearfully admitting I'm not vegan (which as it turns out isn't a problem) and explaining that though I am dressed nicely I really don't mind washing dishes for a few hours at a time, I head to my writing interview (my *professional* appointment). I sent stories from my magazine writing class, student newspaper clips, and a restaurant critique in an email ahead of time.

The office is by the railroad tracks, ten minutes away from Drunken Monkey. When I park, I'm in such a hurry that I forget to pay the parking meter. I navigate my body across the street, through downtown traffic, and make my way to a plain cement building. Panting, I pull on the handle to open the door, but it remains shut. I put my hands to the glass and squint for a look at the inside. It's empty and the lights are off. I check the address again and, satisfied that I haven't made a mistake, I rap on the glass. After a few minutes, a short man with black hair opens the door. It's Louie, the man I've been emailing back and forth, the head of the project.

He leads me through the dark hallways, and I notice there's no tables or chairs and still no people.

“Oh, don’t worry. We’ll fill this place out. I’m a serial entrepreneur, got a furniture business on the side.”

He takes me to the one office with anything in it, a small desk and two chairs, but nothing on the walls—all beige like the outside.

“So, Madison, let me tell you a little about CFF. See it’s the *Central Florida Focus*. Get it?”

I nod, wondering where I should put my hands. Clasped on the table? In my lap?

Louie continues, “Our focus is on the whole of Central Florida, not Orlando by itself, but Lake County, Metro West, you know?” He drums his hands quick on the table. “Not only that, but I want to cover all aspects of Central Florida: business, art, music, events, entertainment—”

“—food?”

“Food! Great idea. That’s what I like, someone willing to give a little input. What kind of stuff do you like to write, Madeline?”

“Madison. Well there’s the kind of stuff I sent you already.”

He shuffles papers on his desk. Looking up at me and glancing down again every few seconds. “Refresh my mind again. There’s so much going on. You wrote about—”

“Oh, well, there was that food review.”

“Yes! The food review. That’s right. Go on.”

“And the clips from the *Central Florida Future* on events that I did for the Variety section.”

“You want to concentrate on entertainment?”

“Yes, but I also would really love to write about restaurants.”

“You know what? Say no more.” He stands up so fast the desk lurches a little. He bangs his hand on top of it. “We’ll have a food critic! Great idea! You’re hired.” He reaches for my hand to shake it, and I notice his filed fingernails, especially the extra long one on his pinky. I decide to ignore it.

In less than a week I am familiar with restaurants in two ways: I’m behind the scenes and the critic. Though I’m mostly a dishwasher at Drunken Monkey, I do get to spend some time behind the coffee counter. Coffee is now more than a drink—it’s craft. I learn to manipulate that large steel machine that hovers over barista counters everywhere. I learn to flip the switch in a fast and rhythmic motion, grinding the espresso beans to the perfect grain size. I use a thermometer to froth my milk to the ideal temperature. I make peanut butter mochas.

With the same vigor I pursue the craft of writing. I learn numerous ways to say delicious. I put words to texture, to ambiance, and, of course, to taste. I eat fish, and as my palate expands, so does my language. The narratives won’t stop forming in my head. Every dish is a story. My notebook accompanies me to every meal, whether I’m commissioned to write an article or not. My mind is full of food and coffee and writing.

One night, I slept over at Chase’s house, a rarity now that I was in high school and leaning more towards the hip hop persuasion as Chase dressed more and more punk. As usual, he fell asleep hours before me.

I woke at 7:30 A.M. to the sound of Cartoon Network beaming me back to the real world.

“Always the last one up. Time to get ready. Mom’s already downstairs,” Chase said when the bunk bed squeaked, hinting at my waking. His mother, my Aunt Jojo, was the director of my

baton team. We planned an all day practice on the racket ball courts of the Pembroke Pines city park. I left Chase up in his room watching *Dexter's Laboratory* while I stumbled down the carpeted steps towards the kitchen for a bagel.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty, you look wide awake,” Aunt Jojo laughed. “Want some coffee?”

I approached the kitchen counter and mumbled something to the effect of, “No. Disgusting.”

“Oh, not the way I make it.”

My stomach tightened as she grabbed a mug from the top cabinet, the one I couldn't reach, and brought it over to the coffee pot. She had the kind with a timer, so when her alarm rang, she woke up to the smell of grounds already brewing. I didn't want my own cup, but I lacked the energy to say so. Besides she rarely listened. Aunt Jojo filled the mug halfway with coffee and halfway with light brown cream from a glass bottle with a golden label. She threw in some sugar and stirred before setting it in front of me. “I like it blond like me,” she said, shaking her bed hair. “It's got a kick.”

I held the mug tentatively in my hands. I hadn't had a cup since the day of the banquet four years ago. I wished again she hadn't made me my own mug. I could have taken a couple sips of hers and been done with it when, as was inevitable, I didn't like it. But now, as a high-schooler and not a child, I was given my own mug, a golden cup of doom in front of me. Holding the drink in both of my hands, I closed my eyes as if that would make it disappear. When it didn't, I put the cup's rim to my lips and looked up at my aunt. She gave a nod, her blue eyes already brightening from her own fix. Preparing myself for the worst, I took my sip. Not the kind of sip where I wet my lips. I was older now, and even if I didn't like something, I could take it.

The thick liquid whooshed over my tongue and emptied down the back of my throat. I relaxed. The brown cream added a syrupy tinge to the coffee and the bitterness melted away with the sugar. It smelled different too, unlike my Dad's coffee with half and half, or Desiree's "black" coffee, this had a dessert-like aroma. I drank it all before my bagel finished toasting. Aunt Jojo winked at me as she took my cup to rinse in the sink.

After finishing the opening shift with Sam, I switch over to dishes. This is my usual job at Drunken Monkey; barista-ing is a once-a-week thing. The chef brings me the egg pan. Someone didn't coat it with oil last night, and it'll take at least twenty minutes to clear off the egg residue. I put it to the side and let it soak for a while. Bob comes around the corner, from the front room to the kitchen. He's the other main dishwasher we have. Truly, though, he's an artist. His paintings, along with others', hang on the store's yellow walls waiting for someone to pay the asking price and snatch them up. He's always here, even when, like now, he's off the clock. As he approaches me, he takes a look at the sinks.

"Hey, Smiley, bad day for eggs, huh?"

I nod and spray what I think is ketchup off a dish. Turns out to be Sriracha, and my eyes water.

"Want something to make it better? I got a little gift . . ." He wiggles an oversized mug in front of me.

"I think I'll collapse if I have any more caffeine," I say. At some point your body doesn't want to take in any more.

“Let me pour you some, and then you can see how you feel.” He grabs one of my recently-washed cups from the drying rack and fills it to the top, raising his eyebrows at me. I grab the dark drink from his hand and take a swig. The warm molasses of whiskey travels down my throat and spreads over my limbs, releasing my mind to instant relaxation.

“Bob, you’re a freaking lifesaver.”

Later, Sam is in the kitchen, taking bubbling milk off the stove for our fresh-made chai tea. The counter is unattended as the other barista on shift uses the bathroom. I hear the entrance door open and scurry from the sink to the front room. A family approaches the counter—mom, dad, and kid. All three, pasty white with gold-red hair. Sam looks over to make sure I can handle it. I give her a small nod, and she goes on crushing cinnamon and sprinkling it into the pot. The mom gazes at our glassed desserts: vegan Twinkies, coconut cookies, cinnamon scones. The father turns his attention to the teas, asks me which ones contain caffeine though it’s clearly labeled. When they’re ready to order, the kid brings over one of our specialty sodas from the refrigerated shelf on the back wall.

“Wouldn’t you rather get a chocolate milk?” the father asks. The boy shakes his head.

The mom moves to put it back on the shelf. “You won’t drink it.”

The boy snaps it back and puts it on the counter with a firm thump. “I want *this*,” he says. “I’m not a baby. I can choose for myself.”

They sit on one of the overstuffed couches by the window. The kid grabs Barrel of Monkeys out of the game section to play with while his parents talk. Later, as I wipe off their table, I see the boy’s soda, one or two sips short of a full bottle.

Before I left for college, my parents, my brother, and I went on a European expedition, exploring Spain, Italy, France, and The Netherlands. Barcelona was our first stop, and, tired from a dozen or so hours on a plane and trekking our luggage to the hotel room, my father insisted we visit a coffee shop as our first sight to see. Warm aromas lifted into the air, matching the cafe's orange and red interior. We all got in line parallel to the dark-wooden counter—Kale and Dad for coffee, my mother and me for hot chocolate. When my father was called to the register, he ordered a cappuccino in Catalan from the young, almond-eyed woman. My brother, too, ordered a cappuccino. I looked at the menu and realized that there was no entry labeled plain “coffee.” There was espresso, latte, macchiato, cappuccino, and something called an americano, which I assumed to be drip coffee. I must have felt the need to assert my nationality or my newfound womanhood (whether my mother loved it or not, hot chocolate was for babies) because when I got to the register, instead of “hot chocolate,” “americano” popped out of my mouth.

Though I had been to plenty of Starbucks with my friends, I usually ordered the strawberries and cream (non-coffee) frappuccino and so had never tasted the pungent beans of the espresso roast. I also never bothered to watch the espresso process before. As I waited for my order, I observed the olive-skinned barista's hands dance across the espresso machine with swift, deft movements: packing the grounds, moving steaming levers, pressing buttons whose functions were unknown to me. Cappuccinos for Dad and Kale were up first; my americano followed.

We sat at a wrought iron table, surrounded by matching metal chairs with bright orange cushions. My father looked at me from across the table. “You sure you're going to like that?” he asked, raising his eyebrows in my direction.

“Yeah, *Dad*, I'm sure,” I said, trying my best decipher the drink in front of me.

“It’s espresso and water, Babe.”

“Yeah, I know.” It smelled like that day when I was twelve. No sugar, no cream, black. Why would I want water mixed with my coffee? I held my breath and gulped down a sip. By now, I was used to shots, and if I could take ten gulps of vodka from a bottle left in a trunk sweating in Florida’s heat and humidity, than I could certainly handle espresso and water. But I didn’t have to like it. The acrid aroma bit my tongue hard. My eyes watered, and I clenched my teeth.

My dad watched me wrestle the espresso down my throat and put his own cup down. “You know, I really love americanos, and I haven’t had one in a while. Would you mind switching drinks?” He asked.

“Well . . . I mean if you really want to,” I said, and he scooted the cappuccino toward me. I gave him a small smile and gazed at this still new concoction in front of me. I sipped the cappuccino. It wasn’t heavy and syrupy like my Aunt Jojo’s coffee. The cream was light, delicate; a new word *frothy* would make its way into my vocabulary. The airy milk diluted the harsh flavor of the espresso. It didn’t hide the taste of the coffee like Jojo’s golden bottle did. Rather, it kept the subtle tone of the espresso, but eliminated its sharpness. I was hooked. Coffee and I had made a match. That tall, dark stranger I expected to meet overseas ended up being a little lighter.

I walk along the paved sidewalk of Lake Eola (which is really more of a pond) with my older brother and his roommate’s dog, who occasionally holds us up to bark at a swan or pee on an oak tree.

“So, what’re you doing now? Workin’ at the coffee shop?” he asks, putting his arm over my shoulder.

I scuff the ground with my flip flops. “Yeah. The people I work with are really fun, though. I had a wine night with a few of the girls the other day.”

“Why aren’t you writing?”

“Well, you know, after I got stiffed with the mag”—turns out after I wrote nine articles, there was no money and no publication, only a lot of unanswered emails and phone calls—“it just seemed like everything was a scam.”

We walk onto a wooden deck that hangs over the water’s edge and look out onto the sun patched water. The dog twists around her leash by our feet. “Yeah, well, I think you really ought to be doing something more with your time than washing dishes.”

“That’s *not* all I do. I barista sometimes. And I like coffee. And sandwiches. And pastries. Besides, I’m still waiting for an answer to my grad school apps.”

He sighs. “Right. Grad school. Still, I think you need to start workin’ in the business.” I cross my arms and bite my lip. “You know my friend David? Well, he’s got all these blogs, and they need to be updated all the time, so he needs a writer.”

I let my arms fall back to my side. “Really? What kind of blogs are they?”

“It’s trade schools and stuff. Not too creative, but at least you’d be writing.”

The dog pulls on the leash and continues us along the path. “Yeah, alright. I mean, a start’s a start, right? But I’m keeping my job at the Monkey.”

The Drunken Monkey is no ordinary establishment. The owners take pride in their coffee roasting. The roaster is a large contraption comprised of a cone on top that filters into a revolving cylinder, much like a pig on a spit, eventually opening into a revolving dish.

After clocking out one night, I pause to watch the owner, Larry, drop beans from the cylinder to the dish. I ask about the temperature of the beans and the reason for the dish's revolving (to help the coffee cool down). Then, he asks if I would like to learn to roast the beans myself. In a few weeks he's heading to his mother's house in Texas, and no one else in the shop knows how to roast beans. Am I available tomorrow night?

I come to the shop after closing time, and Larry gets up from behind his laptop and leads me to the oversized burlap bags that adorn the side of our counter. Each bag is labeled with a post-it: Ethiopian, Guatemalan, Honduran, Ugandan. Larry hands me a clear bucket, and I nervously heave up a bag, at least half my size, of green Ugandan coffee beans and pour them in. We take it over to the scale to be weighed. 4.8 pounds.

"Perfect on the first try." He smiles and turns the gas lever on the roaster. "Now, roasting is serious business. You have to watch the temperature. It comes up on you fast, and if you burn a batch, that's hundreds of dollars down the drain." He stares at me under his huge, bushy eyebrows to make sure I get the point. "I'm entrusting you with a big responsibility."

Larry watches me as I touch the machine for the first time, pumping the temperature up to 400. It doesn't take long for the heat to build, and soon I'm on a step ladder pouring those green beans into the cone in order to drop them into the revolving cylinder. This is a tricky maneuver. I'm not fully balanced, and if I knock the lever with my elbow, the beans could shoot out of the machine, creating hours of extra work. I hold my breath and pour as carefully as

possible, hoping to instill Larry's trust in me, to prove that I am an adult capable of adult responsibilities.

"It revolves so nothing burns," he explains to me. "It needs constant motion. Hear that sound?" I do, like a faint maraca. "If that sound ever stops that's your cue that something has gone wrong." He moves the temperature dial back down to 210 degrees, letting the cylinder's heat gradually cool off. "It needs to roast slow at first, and then spike to a finish." When the temperature reaches 320 or so, we are back on our feet, turning the temperature up to 420.

"I'm counting on you to do this right," he reiterates, telling me once again how much will be lost if I screw up. When the roast reaches 420 degrees, I am told to dump the beans myself. I open the door to the cylinder too quickly, and hot beans come shooting out of the opening, nearly nailing me in my glasses.

"Close it! Close it!" Larry yells and I do, feeling a rush of color taint my cheeks. He takes over, lifting the lever slightly, the hot beans skipping out onto the revolving disk where they belong. "You have to be careful," he says, looking down at me. Then he softens. "Good thing you have eye protection." He instructs me to turn yet another lever from heating to cooling, thereby controlling the airflow. While the revolving beans cool off, we bring the cylinder down to 400 to begin a new batch. I make error after error, and though Larry reassures me I will be fine, his face loses its calm, and he makes me sit down like a little girl and write down the process twice over.

The night is late, but not long. Despite my mistakes and growing insecurity about being left alone with the machine, my cheeks begin to hurt from smiling as I take in the very process of coffee making. The only way to be closer to the bean is in the fields. In the following weeks,

when I roast the coffee on my own, missteps are few and recoverable. From then on, drip coffee is my drink of choice. I know where it comes from. Those beans are my roast. I made them, and I want to enjoy them in the purest form possible. No froth. No cream. No sugar.

I get home from a night of roasting and washing. Chaff (the film that comes off the beans as they roast) is in my hair, my clothes smell burnt, and my hands are pruned. Dusty's out for the night, gone to a show at Will's Pub. I never go out on Wednesdays. The caffeine I drink during the day isn't enough to inspire me to leave my house after a double at the Monkey. Usually, I get home, peel off my damp shirt and collapse onto our couch. Sometimes I cry. I can't explain why. I'm not sad about anything in particular. It's just that an entire day and night of doing dishes, (with the occasional latte made or roast to finish), cup after cup, plate after plate, stupid fork after stupid fucking fork, leaves you with the dire need to release that something, whatever it is, that's built up inside you.

Tonight, however, I don't crash on the couch and cry. Tonight I opt to check my Gmail account, see if David has emailed me with any more article topics to write (Top 10 Personality Traits of HVAC Workers, Court Reporting Employment Outside the Judicial Sphere, A Look at the National Electrical Code, etc.). No new messages. Before I close my laptop, I find myself checking my old university email account for old time's sake. What's going on in Campus News anyway? I scroll through the various LinkedIn and alumni subject lines. Then something stops me. I lean forward in my chair, hover my mouse over a bolded header. It's something from the UCF College of Graduate Studies. I expected them to inform me of their decision through the

Gmail account I listed on the application. I stare for a minute, bite my lip, unsure if I'm ready for the answer. I click.

Dear Madison:

Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you that you have been granted admission to the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at the University of Central Florida for the Fall 2011 semester.

Now, I do cry, but not the same way as most Wednesday nights. I taste salt as tears find the creases in my smile. I read the email over and over again. I'm not sure who to call first—Mom, Dad, Dusty? I can't move. In my stupor, I simply sit there and stare at the screen, my future staring back at me. I remember the feeling of learning something new every day, of being in a community of writers, of writing something other than how-to and 101 articles. I imagine myself working an internship, learning how to edit, using *The Chicago Manual of Style*. I'll read books from authors I've never heard of. I'll critique manuscripts. Workshops will take over my life, a small group of like-minded people all creating together, perfecting the craft. I'll study around the clock—reading, critiquing, writing. I'll have so much to do, I'll need more caffeine than ever. I imagine myself sitting at a cafe, manuscript and pen in hand, drinking my coffee black.

DANGER BOX

The Friday before my twenty-fifth birthday, I drove around Orlando, picking up party provisions and making babysitting arrangements for my cat, Ponce de Leon. I'd gotten Ponce five years ago—when a Tamagotchi would have been too much responsibility to take. Those were the whiskey days. The days of the Danger Box and Cat Ball. The days where I'd skip town, leaving Ponce alone with only a large bowl's worth of food, him not knowing if I'd ever return, if he'd ever see another life again. Once, by accident, I closed the door that led to his kitty litter box. When I got home Ponce cowered in the corner, ashamed of the feces on the bed and in the back of the closet.

This time Ponce would have a babysitter while my boyfriend, Dusty, and I high-tailed it to my hometown in South Florida to celebrate the big day. Dusty had a meeting that afternoon, and so it was me who took care of the logistics and preparation. The search for a proper Ponce babysitter brought up a lot of questions and unpleasant thoughts about the reliability of my friends. Which of these friends would be willing, first of all, to drive all the way to “my side of town?” I lived less than five miles away, but most of my friends lived within a three-block radius from one another. As far as they were concerned, anything outside of that was like venturing out of city limits. And then I had to ask myself which of my friends I could trust with the keys to my home. Would those friends give Ponce the proper attention he needed while I was away? Would they remember to visit him every day, or would I come home to a Ponce stone dead on a scratched linoleum floor? I liked to think Ponce's sense of self preservation would give him super cabinet opening abilities, but who could really be sure?

I settled on Alex, an old roommate who had a soft-spot for Ponce. Very few had sympathy for my cat. He bit. He scratched. He did not cuddle. But when I called Alex and asked for the favor, he said, “Wiener Man?” the term of endearment he’d bestowed upon my cat a couple of years earlier, “Yeah, I’ll feed the little fucker.”

I’d sighed in relief (I didn’t know who else would’ve manned up to the job) and told him I’d be over with the keys right away. I trusted Alex to play with Ponce, albeit roughly—they’d scraped each other up in the past. I wasn’t so sure I trusted him to remember the food. I asked if my cat could stay at his house, that way Ponce couldn’t be forgotten, but Alex had a cat of his own—a girl cat who’d yet to be fixed and so was screaming in heat. I could only imagine the scene the two would make. Her backing her bottom into him, Ponce frustrated with all the will and none of the equipment. She’d have felt jilted. He’d have felt inadequate. So, in order to sidestep the feline soap opera, it was decided that Alex would come to my apartment to feed his Wiener Man.

When I got to Alex’s house, it was dark and a faint party musk hung around the living room. We sat on the couch, and I pushed his cat’s hindquarters away from me as I handed Alex my key and feeding instructions. He raised his eyebrows at the paper. I suppose three paragraphs of directions was a bit much for someone who had already lived with my cat, but I wanted to make sure everything was taken care of. Unlike the old days, I felt a responsibility toward the little thing, and it was about time I started taking care of Ponce the way he ought to have been taken care of since the beginning. I sat with my purse on my lap like a sweet suburban mother. I asked Alex to Instagram pictures of Ponce every day. I said it like I’d miss Ponce, which I would, but the real reason was so that I could be sure Alex was feeding him. Alex could get

caught up in a good McSweeney's story, or mixing a song for a friend's band, or acting as the sound-guy at his favorite bar, or watching a Tromo movie, or just sleeping. He was a virtuoso of pleasure and leisure, and I wanted to make sure my Ponce wasn't lost in the middle of it.

I left Alex's and went back home to where my cat would be. After Post-It labeling my kitchen for Alex, so there would be no question where the food was, I pulled my suitcase down from the closet and got to work. As soon as my bag hit the floor, Ponce came out of hiding to investigate. He circled it, the edges of his whiskers grazing the quilted material. A tentative paw pressed the top, and then his full body rose up and he was king of the suitcase. He grunted less than he usually would for that kind of jump. He'd lost weight since his bladder problems, a \$300 catastrophe that led us to a small wet food regimen—wet food because of the helpful liquid it held and small because of the expense. He was skinny, but he looked better. I shooed him away, but as soon as I opened the suitcase, he was upon it again, the inside even more enticing than the top had been. I've always thought cats were drawn to box-like things because they represented a safe space. A place they could hide in, tight corridors that nobody could invade. But if this theory held any truth, then it was certainly instinctual because Ponce had experienced his fair share of horrors in boxes.

When we lived together, Alex had gotten ahold of a cardboard box, probably from a shipment of CDs for a band he was recording. The first time it happened, it was only a spontaneous reaction. Ponce jumped in, just as he would later jump in my suitcase. He was helpless against the call of a box. What cat could resist those rough corners that scraped the top of the head just right? Those cardboard flaps on the bottom that were placed just so, perfect for

the sharpening of claws? The armor the tall walls provided? And so Ponce was inside immediately. Alex tried to move him, but alas, Ponce jumped right back in. Alex, it seemed, was not privy to the tendencies of catdom, and Ponce's perseverance provided some real entertainment (though I must admit, even though I was more than schooled in the ways of the feline, I also was amused). Alex threw the top over Ponce and squealed in delight when he rested his fingers outside the box and phantom paws appeared to swipe at them. This game, sweet at first, took a dark turn when Ponce succeeded in slicing a nice chunk out of Alex's palm, prompting Alex to pick up the box, hold down the lid, and shake it until he heard the hisses of anger inside turn to meows of fear. Another roommate walked into the room and before that roommate had a chance to hear Ponce's cries for help, Alex handed the box over to him. The roommate, thinking Alex needed a hand, took the box from the bottom. Out came Ponce from the top, headed straight for the roommate's gullet.

The Danger Box was born. From then on, at every party (which occurred just about every night), Ponce was lured into the Danger Box and unleashed on some unsuspecting friend. For a while, this all seemed in good fun, and easy to laugh at amidst an environment of alcohol and drugs and laughter and friends. I reasoned that Ponce didn't have to be downstairs—there was a perfectly quiet and safe upstairs that he could hide away in—a haven if he wanted it. But I know now that isn't fair. Ponce hated to be touched, but he loved noise, and if he felt he could listen to the crowd from the safety of a box, that would be the choice he made. I, for some reason, let him do it, again, and then again, and again.

Those years of the Danger Box did nothing to deter Ponce's love of small spaces. Still, he jumped in my suitcase as soon as it was on the ground. No shooing away would faze him. No

matter how full the suitcase got, Ponce would not move. He was a creature of his own mind. Not only did Ponce perpetuate the generality of cats with “catty” attitudes, but my cat seemed to be all attitude and nothing else. I’ve come to the conclusion that it was my inattentiveness (neglect/abuse?) in his adolescent years that brought us to this point where Ponce paid nothing I said or did any mind.

In the very beginning, I had grand illusions of settling down to parent this animal. Ponce was a rescue from Hurricane Fay. One night, I heard his cries from my bedroom window, weak and pathetic. At first I thought it was just wind and rain, but they grew louder, more desperate. I ran downstairs with my umbrella to investigate, following the cries. Eventually, I found myself underneath my balcony, poking through scratchy bushes, and when I finally parted enough leaves to see the distressed creature, I wasn’t even sure it was a cat. The thing was so small, it could have been a mouse, a rat. I picked the darling up anyway and took it upstairs to rinse the off the mud. When he cleaned up, I could finally tell for sure—thank goodness, I hated the thought of holding a rodent to my chest. He was so young that small black slits sat where green marble eyes would later develop. I called him my alien baby.

I phoned my aunt whose husband was a vet, and she told me to buy cat’s milk (not cow’s milk) and to feed him from a bottle every three hours. It was already midnight, but I sent my roommate to Wal-Mart to get supplies. Meanwhile, I held him and talked to him in a low voice. I told him that I’d be his new mother. That I’d be the one to look after him from now on. My roommate came back, and Ponce ate like he’d just returned from a grueling expedition, home to the land of milk and honey. He downed two boxes of milk in one sitting. His ears moved back

and forth as he sucked on the bottle, adding to his alien aesthetic. I loved the way he cupped my hands with his paws when he wanted more. I loved the way he looked up at me and meowed to be picked up or fed. In only an hour, I'd become his world, and he'd become mine.

That night, five years ago, I set my alarm to wake me up every three hours, so he could get a proper feeding (something I would do for weeks to come). And in the morning, when I realized he hadn't yet urinated, I called my aunt again and learned that sometimes their bodies needed help. So, as she instructed me to do, I took a warm wet cloth and rubbed between his hind legs the way his real mother would have done with her tongue. I felt such relief when he finally went. "Don't get too attached," my aunt warned. "He's a baby of a stray. He probably has diseases. He'll probably die." But I couldn't help it. I'd already named him, Ponce de Leon, the name of a brave explorer. He was my living, breathing son, and I cherished him.

But when Ponce grew strong from baby to adolescent, I did very little to give him a life he'd like. I was twenty and selfish. My attention span was short, and I did not believe that a cat was son enough to tie me down. Soon, I was going out of town, leaving him home alone for days on end. I was drinking whiskey and throwing him across the room at friends—his claws out, ready to stick to them like he was a tennis ball and they were a Velcro mitt. I blew smoke in his face. I poured beer in his bowl. He was old enough, I thought. He needn't be babied anymore. Besides, I didn't want him to get soft.

A couple of years ago, I moved us into a house full of young men—boys. It was a house of weed and cocaine, a house where the parties never had a start or an end—only a continuous cycle. It was a house full of beer bottles and ash and Nintendo. It was the house where Alex lived. The house where the Danger Box began. I'd been one to drink and drink and drink—part

of the pack— but soon the constant rush and flow of that house turned me off. There were some nights that I didn't drink at all, an anomaly in that place. I'd relax in my upstairs room, away from it all, until I needed a glass of water or something else from the kitchen. It was in this new, sober state where I began to see Ponce again as a child. I won't pin all my actions on the alcohol, rather my frame of mind. Certainly, I'd made decisions of my own, and I didn't feel guilty about them the next day. But when the allure of the booze went, so went the allure of the lifestyle. I rethought the way I approached the night. The way I approached tasks. The way I approached my Ponce. I no longer approved of the Danger Box, of Cat Ball. On one particular night, I came down for a glass of water and found a large crowd around Ponce in the living room. They were laughing, in crying hysterics. Friends of mine threw UNO cards at him, decks and decks until all but his head was lost in the pile. I remember the face Ponce made. It looked human. His brows drawn together in embarrassment. I just watched. I didn't step in. I didn't tell them to leave my cat the hell alone, rush in and grab him up in my arms. I watched. And when I couldn't watch anymore, I finished my task of getting a glass of water. I didn't feel that someone who'd previously encouraged such activities could scold them. Ponce fended for himself.

Those actions would haunt me with their aftereffects. Ponce shunned me. He attacked me. He meowed in the night. He ate my internet cords—I believe because he saw how much it angered me. This was what my irresponsible, harmful, parenting had gotten me. A couple of years later, when I packed my bag to leave for South Florida, Ponce snapped at my hand every time I loaded the space next to him with shirts and underwear, and not in a playful way. But, I was determined now to be a more responsible parent. I'd gotten Ponce a babysitter (even if it was

the man with the Danger Box). I Ponce-proofed the house. I tucked away the wires as best I could. I emptied out the trash, so he wouldn't be able to fish out whatever was on top. I made sure my craft drawer was closed, as he'd taken a liking to crepe paper. I put the feather duster back in the closet. I put away all blankets, which he tended to knead and hump. At a quarter-century old, I was determined to make some corrections. I knew what I'd done to him, and I felt I had the perspective now to make it better, if I could. But anger is not so easily broken.

I tried anyway. In my new house, there lived only Dusty and me—and Ponce of course. There were no more drunks. We had jars for rice, and beans, and spaghetti, just like grown-ups. We had cubbies for everything: 45s, important papers, novels, harmonicas. Gone were the days when ash and PBR cans littered my floor. Our walls were filled with decorations that matched: a dark wood framed mirror, a world map, a bookshelf, a trinket from India. Pictures of Dusty, Ponce, and me dotted the walls and sat displayed on end tables. This apartment would not be like the house before it, where the walls were bare expect for splashed liquor stains. Where sweat and smoke soaked up the atmosphere. Where the couches were pieced together from Goodwill and curbs (which would have been fine if not for discoloration and the scent of ferrel cat urine). I began to buy copious amounts of kitty toys. Ponce received a new cat tower. It was a house like a real home, a new beginning, one for all of us. No one came to visit. It was too far—purposefully too far—from most of our friends. Dusty and I had wanted a small barrier—a barrier that would make our house a home and not a venue.

And Dusty and I were getting older, both becoming better parents and adults with lives outside of the bar, though—to be honest—I had strayed far further from the bar scene than Dusty

had. He'd made progress of his own. It used to be that if one person was ready with a bottle, Dusty was on their doorstep—or they on ours. But now he picked the nights he went out. There was a rationing. Sometimes he stayed home because he needed to make sales for his hot sauce company in the morning. Or he stayed home because he preferred cuddling on the couch and watching *The X-Files* with Ponce and me. Sometimes, like an old man, he was just tired. Still, about half the week, Dusty mingled in bars (he now worked in one), and I, sick of the scene, stayed home with our baby.

Despite this fact, Ponce preferred Dusty to me, something I found infuriating. I was the one who'd found Ponce in the first place. Who'd given him home and shelter. It was me—Mom—who taught him to eat, and screeched when he fell off the back of the couch, and kissed and petted this creature whose real mother had abandoned him. I bought his food, kept him free of fleas, offered him cereal soaked in milk when he was good. I calmed him when it was raining outside and welcomed him on the bed in the morning. Dusty didn't do any of those things. "You came out of me," I sometimes told Ponce. This quote made Dusty shudder, but I meant it. Ponce was mine, I reclaimed him. He was a part of me, and I (though I knew Ponce hated for this to be true) was a part of him. But what did I expect? Wasn't mine the greatest betrayal of all? It was I who'd raised him sweetly and then turned. Dusty was a reformed drunk. I was the parent who went back and forth, a sometimes-mother, someone who could turn again.

There were times I plotted ways to get back Ponce's love. I thought about getting another kitten. Maybe another animal consuming my attention could make Ponce jealous. I tried this with a stuffed bunny once—a few times. When Ponce looked, I would cuddle the bunny, moving its head discreetly with my fingers. I'd take the bunny around the house, and Ponce would follow

me, his fur static and nervous. “Oh, I love you little bunny,” I’d coo, and Ponce would watch. Dusty hated to stand witness to this display of desperation, but I relished the attention it drew from Ponce. And what if we *did* get another animal? Don’t most families of four have a daddy’s child and a mommy’s child? They paired up. Each one with a favorite. If we had another kitten, even if my attention to it didn’t grant me Ponce’s kindness, at least I would be somebody’s favorite. Dusty would not grant me this wish. He said I had an unhealthy relationship with cats. Maybe I did, or maybe it was just an unhealthy relationship with Ponce.

I went back to my suitcase and scooted Ponce out before zipping it up. He glared at me until he saw I was walking toward his food cabinet. When I crossed the threshold into the kitchen, he whined and weaved around my feet and stood on the tips of his toes. Like mother like son, meal time was his favorite part of the day. I grabbed a can from under the sink and gave him a full one, twice as much as he would usually get, because I didn’t know when Alex would get around to it the next day. I patted him on the head and stood by the door with my bag. He didn’t bother to look up when I cracked the door open. His insane love of food was a new phase (not since he was a baby with cat’s milk had he been so eager). There used to be days—almost every day—where he would walk away from a bowl half-full. That was when he was on dry food. Since the switch, he’d been different.

There was a photograph I took on the day we switched from dry to wet, a photograph taken only a couple months ago. His fur was fluffy from his flea bath (a motherly gesture of mine), but the look on his face was wide-eyed and worried, the sounds and smells of the vet’s office frightening and strange. He curled up in a pink blanket on a cold metal table. It was the

day I took him in for his bladder. He'd begun visiting his litter box ten times more than usual, but urinating ten times less. He'd stand there for minutes at a time without moving even his tail. Then his whole body shook, beginning at his legs and waving up through his body. I watched him act this way for days before calling my aunt for advice.

She told me to take him to the hospital immediately, that if he didn't urinate within a ten-hour span, he'd die. But it was a Sunday and the only hospitals open were emergency care, where I knew the cost would be monstrous. So, instead, I watched him close his eyes in strain. I watched him shake. I watched him walk as if he had the Earth between his legs. I patted his head and cooed nice words like I did when I first took him out of the bush, and just like back then, they were only promises. I would not get him help that night. I would let him suffer. I called the vet the next morning, but they had no openings until Tuesday. I could have taken him to emergency care. I could have switched vets. But I booked for Tuesday.

Ponce lived through the night and the next afternoon, despite me. When I took him to the appointment, the veterinarian gave me three different options. The first—to let him work through this on his own—was ill advised and left most cats dead. The second was to extract a urine sample and, if crystals showed, to treat him with antibiotics. The last was to give him a full x-ray in case of a kidney stone. I knew that the x-ray wouldn't just dent my savings, it would demolish them, and the California trip I had planned for later that year would be postponed. I looked at Ponce and judged how much money my baby was worth. Did I keep all of my savings? Did I blow it on this little life underneath a blanket? He looked at me from the cold table, those eyes so full and concerned. For a minute, I fantasized about what it would be like if Ponce died. I could start over, get a new kitten, one that relished my attention, a cat that would make my apartment a

home and me a mother. I could wipe my hands clean of this experiment and try again. This time, I'd get it right.

I chose the middle option—the cheapest choice I could make and still live with myself.

But it didn't work. Two weeks later, Ponce wobbled into the middle of the living room and sprayed blood and urine over the carpet. He'd had a kidney stone. He'd survived the way most cats wouldn't. He fought for himself when his second mother left him with about as much thought as the first.

Before walking through the open door, I crossed the room to give Ponce one more pat. If it happened again, if he got sick, I hoped I would go the distance, be that caring adult I wanted to be. But how far away was I from that twenty-year-old who threw her cat across the room? From the nights of empty bottles of whiskey? From the girl who said nothing as her cat lay humiliated under a pile of cards? I loved Ponce, truly did, loved him so much that the way I talked about him scared my family and friends, as if he really did come out of me. But that love turned so easily cool and wicked. I kissed him, stroked him, photographed him, bought him toys—but what did toys mean when he walked right by them with a bladder about to burst through his insides? What did a babysitter mean when his babysitter was a man who would shut him in a box and shake him? I hoped that I was growing, that I was becoming a woman who could care for a living being. I fear, though, what I will always be is a sometimes-mother.

HOW TO BE A BROTHER

1

Before I could swim, and I'm a Florida girl so that's young, my brother, Kale, and my older cousin Jesse played a game called "Drown." I suppose you could say I played too, but I was really more of a prop. My brother recalls the game with great fondness, but I was too young at the time to recall any specific details. Kale tells me that we'd play on Saturdays in my grandmother's pool. She liked dangerous games—she used to let the boys hold onto the hood of her car as she drove, just like James Bond. That may have had an influence on the kinds of play that went on in her house.

Usually (according to Kale), I would skirt the edge of the pool, maybe dipping my feet into the ankle-deep water of the first island steps, when my brother and my cousin would swoop me up, one grabbing my hands, the other my feet, and carry me like a dead soldier to the deep end. There they would swing me, and on the third swing, they'd let go. I splashed and sank. The two would wait until it felt like there was a significant amount of tension, wait until they saw me softly graze the cement bottom of the pool. That's when they'd rush in—just like heroes. And I always survived.

They did it again and again and again. Either my grandmother had faith in their ability to fish me out (or she didn't want to go to the trouble of redoing her wig) because she didn't see the need to intervene. And so it went every weekend. My brother likes to say that it was a great game because it was real—life or death.

2

There's a video of my third birthday. I'm playing with my father on the shallow steps of our community pool, having a blast with my floatie wings. The camera shifts. Kale is standing on the edge of the deep end, looking in, frozen for a long period of time. He is plotting his fall. My mother (off screen) yells for him to jump. But he can't. I can see him on my TV screen, fierce with concentration. My mother calls out again, and he takes a few steps back, runs forward, and tries to halt at the edge of the pool. But there's too much momentum. Like it or not, he's going in that water. His toes scoot over the edge and, awkwardly, he crashes in.

The camera zooms out. We're both in the shot now. I'm still smiling with my dad on the steps. Kale swims over and climbs around us. Again, he stares at the water. He's frozen a second time. My mother offers words of encouragement, but my grandfather tells her to stop watching, says Kale will never jump. My brother takes a few steps back. The camera zooms—mouth a thin straight line, forehead wrinkled at the age of seven. He runs forward again, but this time halts in time, his shoulders just over the line, his feet flat on the concrete. He does this over and over again. Many times he stops. The camera gives up and turns to me wading on the steps. I'm all smiles and waving. And then, in the corner of the screen you see it, a perfect flip, a splash, and then he's under.

3

When I was twelve, my family took a snow skiing trip. I enrolled in a beginner class. On the bunny hill we learned the basics. French fry. Pizza. That was all you had to know. If your skis were parallel, you'd go fast. If you wanted to stop, you drew them together at the front. Kale (a first-timer as well) skipped this class and instead went to the top of the mountain with my more experienced cousin Jesse—they were the big boys. I hung back with the little guys on the

bottom of the slope where his route would end. A while later, when the class was learning how to curve down steep snow, Kale zipped past me, heading straight for the pines. I kept calling “Pizza! Pizza!” But of course he didn’t know what that meant. He was going faster and faster, and maybe getting hungrier and hungrier, until he jerked to the side and face-planted into the snow, stopping himself before he hit a tree. My cousin skied down the mountain a moment later, expertly weaving as I was learning to do.

“Who in the heck is that?” asked my ski instructor pointing to my down and out brother with snow caked to his face. “Who’s responsibility is he?” She tossed her ponytail and looked at my cousin. “He’s going to get somebody killed.” My cousin, though, pretended not to know my brother. Embarrassed, he skied off to the lift as if he was no relation. I don’t remember if I said anything, if I claimed him.

4

The Thanksgiving fight was a yearly tradition. The younger cousins (of which I was the ring-leader) plotted all day. We set up booby traps. We dug up a basins and filled them with fish heads and slime from the lake, covering them up with palm fronds to escape detection. We hid weapons in row boats. Our favorite weapon was a plastic baseball bat, though we were not opposed to throwing slime. We strategized. We would climb my aunt’s Spanish tiled roof for sneak attacks.

The older cousins (my brother included) never planned. They just came out and saw what we’d left for them. They never fell into our traps and, even when surrounded, overtook us easily. They laughed at our plots, broke our plastic bat. Each year they destroyed us, and each year it

ended the same, my brother shoving lake slime in my face, dunking me under the water, and scraping the mud-sand into my hair.

5

In seventh grade, I was at a water fountain in between classes, waiting in line. I scanned the hallway. A blond kid named Jake sling-shotted toward me, which was weird because we'd never been friends. I only knew his name from roll call. But he was watching me, watching me and walking to me, and the whole experience was a little unnerving as most things are in middle school.

“You got a brother named Kale?” he asked, cutting me in line.

“Yeah, so?”

“So, Kale's friends with Mike Govern, and Mike told me you're a little whore.”

A whore was a damaging reputation to have in middle school. It could follow you all the way up through graduation—branding me with six years of whoredom. The accusation made me feel sick, and cold, and then kind of flattered that someone would think I was grown up enough to be a whore. But it was a role I wasn't ready to play. I hadn't even had my first kiss yet (that would come later in the year). I searched for the proper comeback, something cutting to say, but I came up blank. When Jake had his fill of the water fountain, he turned back to me, and all I could do was smirk.

At lunch, I found and told my older brother (our middle school and high school shared a campus). He listened and then yelled and punched things. I had to go to the office and call my mother because he'd been suspended a couple of years ago for fighting, and that was a big deal in my family, especially since the principal seemed to blame my parents' martial arts business

for his “acting out.” My mother talked Kale down, but he still didn’t appear calm. The yelling stopped, but I could see the veins pop in his forearms and the creases on his forehead. I went to class, and I didn’t see Jake or Kale again until the end of the day.

When Jake walked up to me that afternoon, his face was not so cocky as before. In fact, he kept his head bowed. He wouldn’t cut me in line again. He handed me two notes, folded up, both with my name on top. One was signed “from Jake” and the other “from Mike.” I opened them up and saw they were full page, front and back, letters of apology—the one from Mike for making an off-handed comment, the one from Jake for daring to repeat such a comment. It was a great moment of satisfaction for me. I might not have been popular. I might not have had influence. But my brother did, and he gave that to me. He would pave my way.

6

During my freshman year of high school, I began experimenting with liquor, and I do mean experimenting. My best friend’s dad distributed alcohol, and her parents were frequently out of town. We found the key to the liquor cabinet—which was massive given the nature of his business—and skimmed a little off the top of every bottle there was, mixing together whatever we felt like. We had rums, vodkas (oh so many vodkas), gins, mixers (believing they contained alcohol), liqueurs, and whiskeys—all in one night. Her system worked faster than mine and, in an effort to catch up, I’d take three or four shots extra. She used to laugh at me when I sucked them back. She said she liked my gag face. A while later, I’d be hit with what she was hit with, and a few minutes after that, I’d regret those extra shots.

One night, I doubled my extras (I don’t know why I never learned), and lay shivering on the cold tile of her bathroom floor. I told her to call 911. I told her I was dying. I really thought I

was. I remember how my hands shook as I sat up and gripped the toilet bowl, how that yellow bile came up after there was nothing else left. My stomach felt like it was caving in, but more and more fought to get out. I cried to her again. She told me an ambulance was on its way, that they would pump my stomach and everything would be okay. It was a white lie—thank God—or we would have had to do a lot of backpedaling when the cops called her parents.

Instead of flashing lights and a big white truck, EMTs bursting through the door with stomach pumping equipment (whatever that might be), my brother came. He flushed the toilet, pulled back my hair, picked me up, and carried me downstairs and to his car. He put my seatbelt on and handed me a bag in case I had anything else left in me. When we got home, he snuck me upstairs. He made me toast and poured me a glass of water. My throat rejected the bread, and my eyes teared up, a sure sign of vomit. But Kale rubbed my back and coaxed me to finish the slice. The next day, he kept a sharp eye on me. He made sure Mom and Dad didn't ask too many questions. He bought me Pepto-Bismol. A decade later, Kale told me he was on a date that night, hitting it off with a girl named Jessica, when Bethany called. They were supposed to go to a midnight showing, but he dropped her off, and came to me instead.

7

I graduated high school, and my brother and I went to Europe. When we first arrived at the station in Amsterdam, we had no plan. Just a couple of youths in Holland on a whim—not knowing Vondelpark from the Red Light District. We had no map. Our only purpose was to dump our bags as quickly as possible. So, we walked down one street and up another, me following him, until we got to a place that looked like it could have a vacancy. We ought to have booked a hotel with our train, but hindsight never got anyone anywhere. The hotel we found

seemed to be nothing more than one cramped room stacked on top of another. I sighed, and Kale opened the door. We walked in, and the bright sun outside, so perfect for growing tulips and other greens, did not come in with us.

The front desk was abandoned, so I hid behind my brother with our bags as he went up to ring the bell. No response. I looked around for tourist brochures like those we have in Orlando, but there were none to be found. Instead, I turned my bag on its side and sat on top of it, staring at the dusty floor. Kale hit the bell again and called out asking if anyone was there. No response. Finally, I heard feet shuffling to the front. A skinny man swung open the door behind the desk and greeted us. I'm not sure if greeted is the right word exactly. He said welcome with a glare. His English was smooth and even-toned as he took down our information, but I couldn't help feel but feel vulnerable, like we shouldn't have been there, like this was not a place a tourist ought to be.

The man stepped around the counter to show us the way to the stairs (there was no elevator), and I saw he wore a sharp, tight-fitted suit. As I stood up with my bag to follow him, the man didn't offer any help. Instead, he fiddled in his pocket, and a knife popped out, falling to the floor next to him. Lowering himself to pick it up, the man locked my brother in a stare. He clutched the handle of the knife and came up at an extremely slow rate, never looking away. It seemed he wanted our attention. He smiled as he slipped the knife back into his pocket.

As the man led the way upstairs, Kale pushed me behind him, creating a buffer between me and this sharp-suited villain who was looking more and more like Jafar from *Aladdin*. I couldn't shake the shiver that he would have the key to our room. He could come in when we weren't there. He could steal everything. He could come in while we *were* there. I didn't want to

think of what could happen then. When Jafar left us at our door, I looked at Kale in a way that asked, *Should we stay?* And he looked back in a way that said, *Where would we go?*

We dumped our bags and took off, taking all of our valuables with us. Back on the street, we were left with the giant question of what to do with our day in Amsterdam. The obvious answer was to find a coffee house—I don't know why the obvious answer wasn't to find a new hotel. The coffeehouse was basically a bar that sold a few things extra. We sat at the back, Kale rolled joints for us, and I displayed the brochures I'd found outside. We could go to the Anne Frank House, the Van Gogh Museum, The Rijksmuseum, or a million other attractions. But one museum stood out to my brother above all others. I should have known he'd pick it when I set them down. He grabbed a box of matches and tapped the cover of a green brochure—The Heineken Experience. After we were good and confused and in no condition to wander foreign streets with all our most valuable belongings, we tried to read a map (for we had finally acquired one).

A few wrong turns and many helpful Amsterdammers later, we found it. The Heineken Experience was housed in a big brick building with a large glass entrance. We paid our fee, and in turn got to “experience” Heineken by way of three drink tokens each and a walk around the museum. I wasn't big on beer back then, so I gave Kale two of my three tokens. After our tour, he was in even less in shape to protect me from the evils of a foreign city. We left and ate lunch to sober him up, but then went to another coffee shop. Being a creature of habit, Kale then insisted we go back to the Heineken museum.

At the end of that night, we came back to the hotel and crawled up the stairs. Kale kept his arm around me, protecting me from an evil Jafar who might pop out of the shadows, though I

doubt Kale would have been much help. When we got to our room, Kale locked it and shoved a chair under our door. That way, even if it didn't deter the man, we'd at least hear him coming. I slept close to the window, and Kale slept close to the door. It was a veil of protection that made both of us more comfortable.

8

My brother helped build a bar—literally and figuratively—with wood and marketing. And then he let me, his underage sister, in with a few underage friends. It was very convenient. I paid cover only once, and when I did, Kale escorted me to the front door and told the bouncer to get a good look at me because if he ever made me pay money again, he'd be fired. It was an awkward moment. I wanted to squirm out of the grip of Kale's hand and head back inside. I was just happy to be in a bar, but Kale needed it to be just right, just the way. He held tight to my shoulder, flexing his influence and transferring it to me. From that day on, I was waved in always.

9

It was another family trip to the Florida Keys. A yearly tradition, where my immediate family and the extended family on my mother's side got together to get sunburned, scraped, and drunk. Each year the adults got sloshed, and each year we visited a sandbar, which in fact, housed an actual floating bar. It was the first trip where I was old enough to drink legally (all other years, I had to wait for my aunt to slip me a sip from the never-ending-rum-bottle on her boat). To get to the sandbar, we did an epic caravan of two boats, each 42-foot Sailfishes, and three wave runners. The wave runner was the closest thing my mother would ever let my brother get to a motorcycle, so when the opportunity arose to use it, Kale never turned it down. He was

not a great driver. He'd totaled three cars that I knew of, and he once drove a snow mobile off-course and into a tree.

Another thing Kale loved about the Keys, and I suppose I did too, was that it gave us an opportunity to hang out. In most family situations like Christmas and Thanksgiving, he played with the older cousins and I played with the younger, and in our everyday life we fought, but for some reason the Keys differed. They brought out that team feeling we'd experienced now and then during our trip to Europe—banding together as the Bernath kids. So, when Kale opted to drive a wave runner, it was no question that I would be the one to ride behind him. When the ground was not asphalt, and when it was not frozen, he tended to take more risks. You'd think I'd have a better sense of self-preservation.

Kale got us out of the dock area, but not without banging against both of the boats, despite my best efforts to act as human bumper. And once we were in the open blue, following that thick wake the two big boys left behind, he was even less careful. We tested the limits of the wave runner, or, I should say, he did. We went at maximum speed against the current, the waves missing him and slapping my face every time we crashed down onto the surface. Then he tried for greater heights, jumping the wake. He didn't think it might be a better idea to start at a slower speed and work our way up. No, his thumb clutched the plastic to the handle and didn't let go. Still he was not fully thrilled. He wanted to spin. The proper way to turn is to speed, slow down for the spin, and then lurch ahead when the pivot is through, but Kale liked to do it all at max MPH, like he did everything else in life, and I fell.

And fell.

And fell.

And fell.

And, many more times, fell.

When one has not fallen from a wave runner, it might seem like it's not such a big deal. It is water, after all. You're not very high up off the surface. But if you have fallen off a wave runner, you know it's bad. The initial smack before the sink is hard as road. Your head slaps the water, ocean infiltrating your nose till it comes out through your mouth. Your eyes try to blink back the salt—this is especially painful for contact wearers like me. And it can always be worse. Once, my aunt fell off a wave runner and couldn't move at all. She cried when, days later, her back and legs began to tingle. It took months of physical therapy for her to recover. So, it suffices to say, I was not happy with my brother throwing me to sea.

When we got to the sandbar the rest of the family, including Kale, was relaxed and smiling, happy for an easy day of lying listlessly on rafts while the sandbar beverages dripped condensation onto their hands. I was not so. My ears were clouded with water, my eyes were irritated, and I was sure I was bruised in at least four parts of my body (the fun part of being thrown off, is that usually your knee or shin or ankle will hit the plastic seat on your way out). As soon as my brother took the key from the ignition, I jumped out into the ocean, not bothering to help Kale string the machine to the boat (a cardinal rule), and swam to my aunt for safety. At this point, I'd take the rum *and* a drink from the bar.

After hours of floating in the sun, my body began to settle down. The bruises showed more prominently, but they hurt less. I'd gotten most of the water out of my ears, and I'd blinked out most of the salt. I stayed away from Kale, lest I kill him. As we gathered our floaties onto the boat to go, I asked if anyone else would like to take my spot on the wave runner, said that I

would like very much to be on the boat instead. My brother looked at me, cheeks drooped, honestly clueless as to why I would possibly want to break up the Bernath kids and hang out with the little cousin crew.

“No,” he said. “You have to be with me.” I shook my head and refused, but his shoulders slouched so much they practically touched the water, and so I caved, kind of. I took a swig from the never-ending-rum-bottle.

“I’ll go with you on the wave runner if I can drive.”

He agreed, not quite knowing what it meant to be a passenger. The two boats took off, then the blue wave runner, then the red, and then us. I sped through the wake as fast as the wave runner would let me. He grabbed my life jacket tighter. I jerked the handle bars to the right and skidded on top of the swelling wake. I felt his fingers fight to hang on, but at that speed, there wasn’t anything he could do. He flew past me, slapping into the sea with a satisfying crack.

“What the fuck, Madison,” he said when he finally came up for air.

I threw my head back at the sun and laughed a full-throated evil villain laugh. Somebody new was at the helm.

FIVE STAGES OF TRAVEL

1

It is the summer after my first year of grade school. Though I haven't studied much geography, I know that Honduras's capital is Tegucigalpa because that is where we are headed. Right now, I am lost on the world map, but I know we flew here from Ft. Lauderdale, and soon we will be moving on to Honduras. In this in-between city, the people with collared shirts all speak Spanish. My father does too. He is at a counter, talking Spanish, holding up blue booklets, and pointing to my mother and me. She holds my hand, and I can smell the Chanel powder she dusted on her inner arms that morning. We are waiting, she tells me, for our luggage to be transferred.

Through the window, I see a small plane, much smaller than the one we came here on. I spot our luggage in a line outside. We have black bags with wheels like most of the others, but ours are the ones with bright blue ribbons on the handles. I watch two men pick up two suitcases at a time. They toss them into an opening at the bottom of the plane. They are rough with our luggage, rough with my clothes so carefully folded inside.

My father finishes talking to the man in the collared shirt, and he grabs my other hand. He leads my mother and me outside, out to the plane. When we get to Tegucigalpa we will hail a cab, my mom says, but not like the ones in New York. These cabs will not be yellow, but they will take us to see my Aunt Johanna and my Grandma Maja.

Grandma Maja is not fun to be with. She visited us last Christmas and slept in my bed. In the morning, it was wet. I had to sleep on plastic sheets after that, the stink was so bad. If it were not for mint chocolate Milano cookies, there would be no reason to visit Aunt Johanna and

Grandma Maja. They always carry them. I can sit awkward on the couch for those. I can smile at Spanish words for those.

My father tugs at my hand and pulls us along the hot asphalt toward the plane. As we walk, I take note of the men working around me: the luggage men, the pilot, and another man in a jumpsuit. The luggage men finish and wipe their hands on their pants. They head back inside. The jumpsuit man runs duct tape over the wing of the plane. I know duct tape is a strong tape. We use it for boxes at home. I realize that, unlike before, we will not travel through a tunnel onto the plane. We are going to walk up stairs instead. This feels silly. It is no way to board a plane. The pilot man runs up the steps as we approach. We wait outside and await further instructions. Do we go in yet?

The plane sputters with noise, but it dies down quickly. The pilot sticks his head out the door, and yells words I don't understand to the man in the jumpsuit. The duct tape is thrown to the side. Now, the jumpsuit man picks up a wrench. The pilot goes back inside the plane. Do we still stand here? My father doesn't move. The jumpsuit man opens a compartment of the plane's body, looks at its guts. The pilot's voice travels through the doorway, and the sputtering starts again. I think the jumpsuit man is going to tighten something with his wrench, like my father tightens the faucet, but instead he beats the guts, smacking the plane's insides again and again. I've seen my dad do that too. The jumpsuit man shouts to the pilot. The plane starts and, this time, does not die.

The pilot pokes his head above the stairs again. He waves in the direction of my father. My father squeezes my hand. My mom tightens her grip. We board the plane. The plane to Grandma Maja and Milano cookies.

She is six and in Ireland for the first time. Upon leaving the disco with her baton team and relatives, she starts to follow the feet in front of her back to the bus. They seem to be her mother's feet. Jeans hang loose around the calves giving way to dark-colored loafers. The girl adopted this practice years ago, that of following feet. At thirty-six inches tall, she is short, even for her age. Following feet instead of heads seems natural.

These feet are walking quite far. The sidewalk is old and broken in many places. She is sure to avoid the cracks. Her mother, in front of her, does not share her fear of cracks. Her mother steps on each one as though there were no consequence. To the girl's right, the road stretches. Taxis honk their horns and blaze past. It looks like a never-ending stream of headlights. To her left are buildings of brick and stone. It seems strange to her that houses should be made of such things. Houses, everyone knows, are made of concrete. They walk further. They pass busses, pay phones, and stairwells. The girl realizes the gossip and clamor of young girls, that she has grown accustomed to on this trip, has disintegrated into the air. Where is everybody?

She looks up. She is astonished to find that the feet she was following were not her mother's feet at all. Her eyes are hot with embarrassment. The fake mother must have heard the girl's muffled cries because she turns around to gaze at the child. The man she is walking with also turns.

"Are you lost?" the woman asks. The girl doesn't answer. She knows she should not talk to strangers.

“Where are your parents?” asks the man. The girl shakes her head. Does talking include gestures? She is unsure. She looks behind her. Her rowdy baton friends are nowhere to be seen. In fact, the street has grown somewhat bare. She debates talking to the stranger.

“I don’t know,” she finally says. “I followed your feet.” The woman raises a thinly plucked eyebrow.

“Come, we will find them,” the woman commands. She takes the man’s hairy hand and they walk back towards the disco. The girl follows them, following feet. The man wears tan boots. His pants are too short, showing glimpses of his white socks. “Are you on a bus?” asks the woman.

“Yes, a big one,” the girl replies. “I think it’s blue.” There are many blue busses. They stop at each one, and the girl raises her head in hopes of seeing royal blue team jackets in the windows. They are foiled over and over again: a bus filled with wrinkly people with white hair, a bus of rugby players, another of cheerleaders. They search and search, but the bus of baton twirlers seems to have disappeared. One blue bus in the distance revs up its engine in anticipation of its journey. The tan booted man runs up to the departing vehicle waving his hands. The bus door opens.

“Hold on!” the girl hears the man shout as he approaches. “Do you have everyone? My wife and I found a little girl.” As the girl walks, still following the woman, she is no longer looking at feet. She is looking at the bus. She hears high-pitched shouts and screechy giggles. The woman in front of her quickens her step. The girl follows swiftly behind. “Hurry up!” says the man.

They arrive at the running bus, and the girl does see a stream of royal blue team jackets. Her mother, both aunts, and her grandmother lean their heads out of the doorway.

“Oh my goodness,” her real mother says, tripping down the stairs. “Thank you so, so, so much for bringing her back. We were about to leave!” She picks up the girl in her arms and carries her on board. The laughing and giggles stop. Everyone stares. The girl looks out amongst the heads sitting in the seats. All of her best friends and their parents, lined up in rows. Those closest to her, Hali and Natalie, sit with their backs straight, rigid in their seats. She turns to her grandmother, dressed in a sequined top.

“Oh, baby,” Her grandmother says, leaning toward her. She does not accept the outstretched hand her grandmother offers.

She switches her gaze to her Aunt Jojo who is in all white save for her dark brown, fur coat. She talks to the bus driver in a low voice about an attendance roster. The girl looks around again and spots her Aunt Jean staring at her with large hazel eyes, heavily blotted with mascara. Her mother still holds her. The girl takes it all in and feels a lump in her throat which threatens to bring itself up and explode through her eyes. She feels the stares boring their way through her.

“You were leaving without me!” she croaks. The lump reaches its altitude and the tears begin to fall.

Her mother kisses the top of her head and settles them both into the front seat. The talk of young girls fills the air again. The girl leans into the chair’s back. Its furry upholstery scratches her face and is uncomfortable.

“Baby girl, we didn’t mean it,” her mother soothes, running her hand up and down the girl’s arm. “We would have noticed. I’m sure we would have noticed, if not on the ride back to

our hotel, definitely when we got there.” The girl continues her crying. “We would have found you. I promise,” her mother says. Her mother’s long brown hair is braided, and it falls over her shoulder framing her tanned face. The girl burrows into her mother’s hair and the sweet scent of Pantene Pro-V soothes her. This is a privilege.

She is not normally allowed to cling to her mother like this. Usually, she is passed off to one of her aunts or her grandmother. Hugs are only on special occasions. Usually, her mother pats her on the top of the head or brushes her fingers up and down on her arm. The girl clings to her mother, reveling in the embrace. She can smell the Chanel powder and feel the smooth, ironed clothes. Her mother holds her with one hand and pets her head with the other.

The girl changes her position to lie down on her mother’s lap, a gesture that is unheard of. Her mom continues to pet her head and now rubs her back as well. The girl snuffles. Her eyelids flutter. She is sleepy with stress, but does not wish to miss this moment. She does not want to wake up to a mother that has grown tired of her lying on her lap. She does not want the back rub to cease. She fights with her eyes, but they are swollen and ready to close. She lets them, but she will not give in. She hears her grandmother speak to her mother.

“Poor child,” says her grandmother. “Could you imagine? We almost left her on the streets of Dublin.” Her grandmother laughs. “Maddy would be the one to get lost.” The girl strains her ears, but can hear no more. She is falling away. Falling into the dark, falling into sleep. She concentrates on the movement across her back. It feels like waves, soothing waves of home lulling her away.

You fiddle with your bracelets in the passenger seat, tipsy from the whiskey apple cider downed only a moment ago. Your boyfriend, who also had a few, must be feeling something similar, though he shows no signs of it. You think you should have brought a flask. That would have been a safer way to do this. But he pulls into Magical Midway without hitting the curb, and when the cashier gives you a choice between one go-cart ride or three hours of free range, you go with the latter.

After all, it's been a while since you two did anything together but watch Netflix. What with your master's program and his hot sauce company, there's barely time for dining together much less a date. But here you both are, playing drunk hooky in Tourist Town.

When you walk up to the track, it becomes apparent to you that you've never actually driven a go-cart before. The smell of gasoline gives you a feeling of danger and delight, and you run to the cart behind your man and threaten to run him over, though the rules explicitly state NO BUMPING. The traffic light in front of the double line of a dozen go-carts goes from red to yellow, and when it hits green the man in uniform blows his whistle, and you feel the alcohol pump through your veins. You are going to *win*. You'd rev forward to hit your boyfriend's cart, but the man in charge is standing on the platform next to you, and he's a buzz kill. So, you wait until you're around the first loop, hidden, and then zoom at max speed, but you can't catch up. A pre-teen girl has taken the inside. You keep bumping her, but she's holding her ground. Already, your man has maneuvered between three carts (without bumping), and is throwing his hand up in a fist as if he were Mario himself. You're hot despite the wind rushing past your ears. The excitement feels like it's flowing out of you onto the track. You bump the pre-teen harder than before. Her ponytail goes wild as she fights to right her vehicle, but she's lost, and you are on the

inside now. You are the ultimate fighter, The Highlander. You're catching-up now. Only two carts' distance between you and him.

But what's this? An employee blows his whistle. He steps onto the track, palms up, declaring the end of the race. He glares at you, for he saw your transgressions. You puff out your chest and cast a glance at Pre-Teen Ponytail. She's three carts behind—sucker. The Magical Midway employee directs the carts back to the starting point. Your boyfriend flashes you a cocky smile as he zips into his spot—ahead of you. You feel that flush of heat again, a burp escapes, and you decide to go for one more bump.

4

I was taking the train heading from Cambridge to London. It was to be my fourth time on this particular train. I was experienced. I was knowledgeable. I didn't even write down directions for the twenty-minute walk from St. Catherine's dorm to the station. Straight down Trumpington, left on Lensfield, right on Hills immediately after the golden statue.

I did not get confused at the cross section as I did that first time. I did not wander around the busy station with its wooden benches filled with chattering people, looking to find the ticket booth as I had before. I knew it was straight to the right. I knew to the left was a tourist store with overpriced scarves and mugs and TV dinners. After I purchased my ticket, I knew where to place it to go through the revolving metal bars; I did not fumble and hold up the line as an attendant came to rescue me from across the floor, as had happened the first time. I knew to turn right when I got through those metal bars to the outside. I knew to breeze past the small concession shop with only enough room for one teenaged boy to stand and sell stale pretzels and

watery coffee. I knew to move to platform two—that platform two would take me to London, to the Underground, which would lead me to another train to Wycombe. I was experienced. I knew.

Only I didn't know that when I got off the train at Kings Cross Station, the Underground line I was supposed to use would be closed for Olympic construction. I didn't know that instead of catching two lines to get to the train station, I would actually have to catch five. I didn't know that when I asked an old, hunchbacked woman for directions that she might be wrong, that I would later have to ask an actual worker—in uniform—for help, and be told I'd been headed in entirely the wrong direction. I didn't know that when the yellow blinking sign at the platform read the name of the stop right before the stop I wanted to go to, that the Tube car would not make it to my desired destination. I didn't know that it would take me almost twice as long on the Underground, so that I would almost surely miss my train, or that a duffel bag that did not seem so heavy on a twenty-minute walk would be quite heavy lugging in and out of Tube cars. I didn't know that once at the train station, it was important to pay attention to the way the “right” train was heading, so I would not go three stops in the opposite direction. I had no idea I would arrive in Wycombe in the early evening instead of noon as planned.

I did not know that I was definitely, unquestionably, exceptionally, not experienced.

5

Our bodies jolt up and down, side to side, at all angles in the most uncomfortable of ways. Seawater splashes at our faces, at our sunburnt shoulders, at our nappy hair. Salt crusts over our skin, sneaks into our nostrils, leaks through our lips. It tastes like childhood, like long days at Grandma's beach house.

The waves were not like this on the way to Bimini. On the way to Bimini, this Sailfish cut through water like a razor through glass. Then, we looked straight down, one-hundred feet down, and could see coral on the ocean floor. On the way to Bimini, the water was glass without a tint, perfectly clear. Salt and sand did not distort the picture. Now it is not so. At the back of the boat, we try and look down at the sea, though our bodies are thrown with each jagged wave. Now we see foam, fizzles of broken white over musty blue.

To distract our bodies, we pass a bottle, a handle of clear Bacardi Limón. We suck on the mouth piece that is meant to touch only the edges of cups. The glass knocks at our teeth, sharp pains shoot to our gums, but it is worth it. It numbs the bumps. It makes the jerking and the rocking seem fun, the bruises seem like prizes. Bacardi Limón tastes like a moist towelette, but we don't mind. It is worth it.

About an hour and thirty into our trip, we reach the halfway mark. We will be in Miami soon, the place of alarm clocks and assignments and social engagements. But we are not there yet. This is what they call the champagne glass. No land in view, we are surrounded only by water. When we look out, farther than the foam at our sides, we see the layers of blue. Midnight blue means the water is deep. Bright and turquoise could mean coral reefs, where we find nurse sharks like the one we speared and ate only yesterday. We look around us. We know the sea does end, will end, but for now it looks like there is no land, like we will be in water forever. The sky curves around the sea's edges, just like a champagne glass. We idle for a minute, letting the waves crash over us, looking out at the open space.

Before we lose ourselves, we pump up the engine and fly north, toward Miami, toward home. The Bacardi splashes over our mouths, mixes with the ocean water. We lick our lips, we look forward, our leisure behind us, our lives in front.

III. FINAL NOTE

AGAINST TRAVEL

Travel, one might say (the one being me), is full of guilt. Other people might go on about the anticipation of new places, titillating cuisine, famous sites, and strange faces. But I know that underneath it all is a heavy layer of remorse and shame. It stabs us, penetrates us, right from the very beginning.

Because in the beginning, there is the dreaded request for a ride to the airport. This is a process where I must rate my relationships, and the poor ones that are closest to me are the losers. If I'm lucky, my boyfriend will be available, and he has to take me because that's love. If not, I can ask my brother, but if my flight is before four o'clock in the afternoon, there's no guarantee he'll make it. My best friend works fifty hours a week, and I'd hate to ask her to spare an hour for an errand. Then there are those friends who I haven't spoken to in a good eight months, but who I've known since age five. They'll take me, but not without a smirk. Or I can try out a new friend, push that relationship to new limits. Choose one and go down the line, that's what I do, trying to vary it up for each trip or vacation. Perhaps this time it's the best friend. I'll drag her out of her warm bed and rumpled sheets, out onto the rainy street with her boyfriend's car that might break down at any moment, so she can shuttle me to the airport before going into the kitchen for a double shift.

And when I leave, what have I left behind but my cat? (If you have no pets you are lucky in this regard.) Who will feed him? My boyfriend is often out of town. Best friend is allergic. Brother twenty-five minutes away. Neighbor? I suppose. But are we that close? How do I feel about him poking around in my house? Perhaps an old roommate whom I no longer hang out with regularly, but who has a relationship with my cat. My grandmother would say to let the

thing die, but I know I have to choose and choose well because whoever that person is, they'd better be reliable, and they'd better play with my kitty while I'm away. My whole trip I'm left wondering if I left him in the right hands. If he's starved. Or if not starved literally, starved figuratively. I imagine him meowing into the night—no attention paid to him for an entire week, wandering the halls as if he's been left forever, because, of course, there is no way I can explain it to him.

But I leave my cat anyway and board the plane/bus/train/car to wherever I'm going—Paris we'll say. It's a plane. And as I sit in my seat, I think of all the plans I have waiting for me. All of the options. I flip through a National Geographic book. What to choose? I'm on a limited budget. Perhaps I will not come back to this place for years, if at all, but some experiences will have to be cut from the schedule in the name of money and time. I know I will jam-pack my day—a morning activity, an afternoon activity, an evening activity, and a night activity. If I'm lucky, and savvy, half of these will be free. But no matter how I plan—I go to the Eiffel Tower, the Champs-Élysées, the Sacré-Coeur, The Louvre—no matter, when I get home, someone is bound to say, *Did you visit Pont Neuf? It's really the best thing about the whole city. Not even worth going to unless you see that.* And so, I've wasted a vacation because I didn't plan ahead enough, or else I didn't have enough time and had to make some cuts and then cut the wrong thing, and now the vacation is forever tainted because it seems that one person isn't the only fan of Pont Neuf. Now, that bridge is everywhere—in essays I read, in movies I see, on the lips of nearly every person I talk to about my trip—and I feel worse and worse and begin to wonder if I even experienced Paris at all, if all that money and all that planning was just a wash, a basin of time in which I did nothing important or interesting or novel. But maybe I've gone too far.

While I'm there, I don't yet know how important Pont Neuf is. All I know is that I want to walk along the Seine in the morning with a croissant; take a fish-face picture in front of the Eiffel Tower; hoof it to the Musée d'Orsay and stand in front of Seurat's "Le cirque" sketches, ignoring everything else that isn't French impressionism; have a latte and lunch on the go, so that I may check out Notre Dame before it closes; and then dash to my hotel to change into something sequined and sexy (boobs pushed up to my neck and knee high boots in true Grandma style—you are where you came from), so I can down a bottle of champagne at the Moulin Rouge. After all, I only have a certain amount of time—say six days—in order to see everything there is to see in such a huge city. Not to mention the field trips that would be nice to take, to say, the Palace of Versailles where one can explore the fairytale rose gardens of Marie Antoinette. The woman may not have understood government, but, my God, did she understand beauty.

And with all this going on, there comes a point—a point where the body just dies, where one more step on that swollen foot could just mean the end of it. That's it, foot juice all over the place, splattered over the furniture, my flesh and fluids sprinkling wallpaper. My back aches. My eyes—all they want is rest. They've been straining all day, looking at sights, taking in the sun of the city. My body wants to curl up and never, never, move again. The trip is only halfway through, and so what happens? Something must be cut from the schedule. Time must be made to rest my aching bones. So, I sit on the edge of the bed, my ass so happy to be resting on a soft space after a day on the Metro, and I know what I must do in order to survive the rest of the week. So, hand shaking from exhaustion, I scratch off tomorrow afternoon's activity. I will give up my walk through Pont Neuf. Instead, I will sit down and rest my little legs while someone

else enjoys the trees and flowers. Instead, I will lie in bed with a bottle of wine. I will peel off my sweaty socks and watch Anthony Bourdain on the hotel television. I will drink and feel sad because Anthony is out there talking to people, partying late into the night, eating questionable street food at fifty-something, when I—a (kind of) young twenty-five-year-old—am too tired to even go downstairs to the bakery for a pastry. And so, there I am, thousands of dollars and planning later, doing nothing more than I would be doing if I were at home.

But the next day, I am out again, viewing that day's church—the Sacré-Cœur Basilica. Churches, it seems, are highly recommended areas of interest. I wonder how terrible I'll end up feeling if I don't see every beautiful church in Paris. There are only so many golden Christ statues one can take—only so much marble flooring, only so many candles one can light. Each church has its own detail, it's own angel carvings, but each sacred space mirrors the last. The Sacré-Cœur Basilica is the most interesting so far because it has those machines that flatten coins into alternative shapes. At zoos, a metal bit with a zebra usually pops out, but here, the output is an embossed plate of the church itself—thumbnail sized. Other than that, though, it is a church like all churches. Stained glass, hushed voices, and the need to bolt. But there's a cathedral to see in every section of the city. Every one of them with a history and reputation. Why is it that Europe is so religious and ancient? It makes my week's schedule packed and repetitive. And worse, it makes me want to cut out historical places in the name of boredom and streamlining, but I know I'll regret it. That's why I've come to the Sacré-Cœur Basilica even though I've already reached my limit.

After another quick look around, feeling guilty for not being more pious (though I'm not sure why when the gift shop is actually located *inside* the church), I rush out the door and down

the steps to view Paris from the hill upon which the Sacré-Cœur sits. The whole city is in view. The Eiffel Tower can be seen to the far right. A great circle of building tops cut with streets, golden statues twinkling in the crevices. Ahead of me, a couple holds hands and kisses. I think of my boyfriend and how much he'd love it here. And how this experience would be so much better if I could be the one holding hands and kissing. And then I miss my boyfriend. And my stomach aches a little bit for sadness. And I think how nice it would be if I were with him in my home instead of here in this strange place with nothing familiar. And then I hate the couple ahead of me. And then I hate myself because here I am, in the middle of a beautiful city, some would argue *the* most beautiful city, and I'm not even enjoying it because I'm missing a *boy*? I am reminded of my grandmother's fears. That men will take over your life. That they will take away your will to adventure and make you have babies and sew and join the PTA. And then I am reminded of her favorite motto: *You make your own good time.*

So then, perhaps, I think, *I ought to find a solution.* I'll hunt around in some souvenir shops. I'll buy a lighter with a pin-up girl on it and an ashtray that says "Paris" for him. That way, I'm getting the Parisian experience, but I'm also thinking of the boy in a non-guilty way. I plan to subvert the guilt. I pick up postcards, and foie gras, and a *Wolverine* (because they had no *Batman*) comic book in French. But as I juggle my purchases in my hands, I am reminded of how my suitcase just barely fit all of the belongings I needed in order to get here, and how it will be a stretch for me to stuff all of these tchotchkes in my suitcase and still be able to zip it up. And so I am angry again at that stupid couple and my stupid self for not thinking ahead.

The next day, I get up for another full day of festivities, and I need a sweater. I am reminded of my full suitcase and how much more space I would have if France was like Florida.

If France was like Florida, I would need hardly any clothes. A bathing suit and shorts—if that. A whole week's worth of clothing could fit in the chair pocket of the airplane. But not here. In Paris everyone walks around like they are one step off the runway with their stylish buns and red lipstick and coral pants and green blouses. Every day I have to get up and layer. I must put on tights and shorts and a breezy tank top with a cotton rhinestoned sweater and hope that I blend in. I spend too much time in front of the mirror when I know that really I should be outside, should be walking around the Latin Quarter. But I'm too afraid of people recognizing me as a tourist. I don't know why this is the case. It is immediately apparent when the first words out of my mouth after *Bonjour* are *Parlez-vous anglais?*

And even if I did know the language, no matter how hard I tried to fit in, I'd never make the cut. I'm one of those arrogant Americans that doesn't care to research the foreign country they are visiting until the plane ride over, and so consequently, I know only about the sights and nothing about the customs. So, I see the Champs-Élysées, but I do not know that when I go out to dinner, the check will not be split, that it is rude to ask them to split it, and that they most certainly do not give their customers doggie bags. I suppose if I was proud of the food I sold, I might not want it to be taken home and nuked up so that it tastes a tenth as good as it did once—so that my dish is compromised, is remembered in that reheated state. But this enlightened attitude is not with me yet when I make my request, and so my server chucks a plastic container, which is clearly kitchen Tupperware, on the table in front of me. The glasses clank against each other. The plates shake. And I feel dumb. And guilty. And uncultured for not thinking to know. For not thinking to look up dining etiquette. For thinking every other place in the world does their business like America.

What's even worse to admit is that even though I feel remorse for not reading up on the country, I feel a certain superiority in the way Americans do things. I'm proud of our POS systems that make everything so easy. So that one person doesn't have to feel like a big shot and pick up the tab for twelve, or even three. I'm proud of our spacious, lightning-fast elevators. Of the ease with which we can roll out of bed and walk into the world in a way that is totally acceptable (at least in Florida's case). And the longer I stay in a place, the less I am excited about the quaint novelties and the more I miss my American home. This is the greatest guilt of all. Because I know it is the great sin of America to feel it is the best, and perhaps I'm not even sure we are the best, as much as we are the best for convenience. But I so do appreciate that convenience, and this is why I must be the worst traveler of anyone that ever lived because no matter how much fun I'm having, there is always something that nags in the back of my mind that says, *Americans do it better.*

But I do try. Every day I try something new. Every day I eat something new. It may be escargot or cow tongue or duck liver. I try it all. To get the experience. To live the French way. I push my comfort zone. I rent a bike and explore the city at a slower pace. I buy a Metro ticket and inhale the scent of urine as I take my plastic seat, navigating the city on the fast-track. I spend ten minutes in front of a sculpture and read a tiny plaque that tells me the time period and the style, and I nod as if I understand. I go into French shops and buy decorated flat shoes, so I can be like the other women. I wander by the pond in the Jardin du Luxembourg and watch children push their toy boats around with long sticks. I buy crepes on the street-side. I go into sex shops to see if they sell anything I haven't seen before. I make day trips to wineries and to palaces. And then I come to a point where it is too much. I just want something familiar.

And so I sneak into a McDonald's, ducking my head in embarrassment as I cross the threshold into that fast-food shop. I buy a medium fry and ten McNuggets with barbecue sauce and a Coke. I haven't even had McDonald's for years. I gave up fast food along with soda after I gained the freshman fifteen. But here I am, scooping a big glob of sweet brown sauce onto something that isn't quite chicken and shoveling it in because it's nostalgic, and it reminds me of home and comfort and a life where there isn't that constant need to try something new every day. I leave with a sick stomach, and I believe my body's reaction is only partly because of what I ate. The other half is shame for being in the culinary capital of the world and eating McDonald's. You might say, *Oh that's natural. One falls off the wagon once*, but I go back—twice.

And, pretty soon, it isn't just the food. I begin to squirm without a comfortable environment of my own. I discover that I'm too spoiled to camp out in a hostel. To come back after a night of drinking to a dorm room of twelve other women. To grope my way through the darkness, occasionally brushing their feet or their stomachs in pursuit of an empty bed. To find that the only empty bed is a top bunk. To find that my sheets are not yet on that bed. To try to make that bed without waking the girl underneath me. To step on her hand as I climb up the rickety metal to my own mattress. To feel exposed in my too-short sleeping shorts when everyone else wakes up in the morning and sees me in all my hung-over glory. I miss my home. I miss my cozy bed. I miss waking up to a boyfriend who rubs my back and brings me chicken noodle soup.

And when I'm done proving that I am a traveler that most countries would like to kick to the curb, France finally does. And I'm on a plane ride home. And on that plane ride, I feel the sinking feeling of leaving all of those adventures aside, of returning to my regular life. And

suddenly regular life doesn't sound so great as it did when I was abroad. When the plane spits me up, and I find myself safe at home, I begin plotting my next trip. Spreadsheets and schedules scatter around the table. This time I will be prepared. I add money to my savings account. I look for academic reasons to go, so that others—hello Grandma—might give me the money to do so. I am determined that I might this time see Pont Neuf. I plan and plan and plan. And save and save and save—completely forgetting what a curmudgeon I'll be when I get there. When I do collect the necessary funds, I'll get someone to drive me to the airport, and someone to watch my cat, and I'll see the sights, and miss home, and my feet will burst, and then, lo and behold, when I'm back again in the States, someone will say, *Did you visit Opéra de Paris Garnier? It's really the best thing about the whole city. Not even worth going to unless you see that.*

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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