



Bridgewater State University

Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Honors Program Theses and Projects

Undergraduate Honors Program

4-17-2020

Where the Heart Is A Collection of Nonfiction Essays on the Meaning of Home in the Age of Movement

Alyssa Raymond
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Raymond, Alyssa. (2020). Where the Heart Is A Collection of Nonfiction Essays on the Meaning of Home in the Age of Movement. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 342. Available at:

https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/342

Copyright © 2020 Alyssa Raymond

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Where the Heart Is

A Collection of Nonfiction Essays on the Meaning of Home in the Age of Movement

Alyssa Raymond

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English
Bridgewater State University

April 17, 2020

Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Benjamin Carson, Committee Member

Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Committee Member

Critical Introduction

When I first decided to do this thesis project, I wanted to focus on travel, telling stories of my time living and traveling abroad. I wanted to write real accounts of my travels to show how ugly and difficult it could be sometimes, in hopes of showing a less romanticized and more realistic account of traveling. However, after I began writing I discovered another theme present. I found different meanings of home that I've held whilst traveling become a big part of the project. As I've learned traveling affects my own definition of home, I found it important to include my idea of home when I was younger through the home life I had then to show the differences between then and now. This was something I had absolutely no intention of including in this project originally. The four nonfiction essays in this collection serve to go against the romanticized narrative that travel is easy and a means of escape and connect the definition of home with travel.

I've always enjoyed reading about travel even before this project. I noticed most accounts in contemporary travel writing romanticize travel and feed into the idea that all travel is a means of escape. Through my own travel, I've seen how these kinds of romanticized accounts of travel, such as *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, can be misleading and inaccurate. Many of the themes in contemporary travel writing have to do with the ideas of wanderlust and traveling as a means of escape from reality. These themes are too simple to be the whole reason why people travel. These themes make traveling seem more recreational than as educational as it can really be and often is. They also frame travel as something only for the wealthy so my working class student travel experience is much different than some other accounts in the genre. Therefore, I hope this project will make readers of this demographic and class view travel as more accessible.

Throughout this project, I read popular and contemporary travel literature by well-known travel writers, such as Bill Bryson and Pico Iyer, both to gain knowledge about the themes of contemporary travel writing and take note of their craft. Through my reading I not only noticed that many of these travel writers were more wealthy and romanticized travel, but also how they limited their discussions of what a home is. Home is seen in the traditional sense of specific places but these writers gloss over why these places grew to have such a meaning. Without the human aspect of people and culture that make up a home, these places would simply be “a piece of soil to us,” as celebrated travel writer, Pico Iyer says in his Ted Talk entitled *Where is Home?* (Iyer). It is this simple idea of home being only the places, or only the soil, that is present in some of the travel narratives that are critiqued more heavily for romanticizing travel.

Where the Heart Is complicates the current definition of home in the travel narrative to reflect a more realistic definition of home in a society where people are constantly moving and traveling regardless of reason or circumstance. Through this memoir of one college student's relationship with traveling mirrored with her relationship with her family from her traditional home, *Where the Heart Is* fills the gap in travel literature of home being depicted as more than a physical place but the place where our loved ones are.

In addition, *Where the Heart Is* gives readers a tangible definition of home throughout four essays of examples and stories illustrating that definition. This definition being that a home is not a place, but the feeling of security one gets when with a loved one when they claim them in a place that may or may not be known to them. We attach these feelings of security we get from those loved ones to the place we are where we felt secure with them and/ or know we will feel secure with them. Through the collection there are examples of these feelings of security from being claimed by being in places where I meet new people, making that city feel like home,

and go to new places where people I know live, making that city also feel like home even though I have never been there before. In order to go against the traditional home definition, these scenes of traveling to find home with feelings of independence and acceptance are juxtaposed with scenes from my home growing up where I never felt at home where I was traditionally expected to. This juxtaposition serves not only to illustrate the irrationality of the traditional definition of home, but also to talk about an underlying theme of the essay about alcoholism and drinking while traveling.

This theme also serves to show the uglier side of travel to counter the popular romanticized narrative that travel is an escape. I touch on themes of alcoholism, falling ill, missing out, and being on a budget to depict a more realistic and non-romanticized account of travel. These themes are important to the overall project because they give the reader tangible evidence against the romanticized travel narrative. *Where the Heart Is* adds a brutally honest account on traveling in order to counter the romanticized ideas of travel while still being inspirational for readers who previously thought travel was unattainable for them because of money or status. Additionally, it is helpful to readers who have felt marginalized through their travels, not having a physical place to call home from constant movement, by addressing these feelings directly. It allows readers to take away a tangible definition of home and the understanding of how it changes as you travel.

In my first essay, "Irish Whiskey Feels More Like Home," I support nontraditional ideas of what home is and counter the narrative that travel is a means of escape from reality by showing that I cannot escape from the alcoholism of loved ones through travel. I juxtapose ideas of home by switching between past and present, layering memories of traumatic childhood experiences with those I had studying abroad. I directly compare the feelings I associated with

home in the United States of helplessness and loss of control to the feelings I learned to associate with home after living abroad of freedom and independence. The sense of agency I got from going abroad gives me the confidence I needed to understand my mother and her alcoholism don't have to be my home if I don't want them to be. I compare my mother's alcoholism when I was young to the drinking habits I notice in general and in my friend Podge while visiting and living in Galway, Ireland. However, I illustrate despite not being able to escape this, I find a way to make a home for myself in this foreign city rather than one I am forced to fit into.

As previously mentioned, I didn't think I was going to talk about my family, particularly my mother, as much as I ended up doing. Many travel books and essays glorify travel as a way to escape your problems and have a new setting fix you with little to no effort on the traveler's part. This is illustrated in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, where she overcomes her divorce through extravagant travel and fleeting relationships with men and faith. I resist this idea through the mirrored actions of both my mother and Podge, illustrating that, even while traveling, I experienced the same issues in Ireland that I was running away from in the United States. I mainly show the similarity between my mother and Podge through each of them calling me a "cunt" when drunk (20). Through the parallel of this crude language, I set the foundation for the rest of the collection that alcoholism is initially my idea of home that I continually find even while abroad. It sets the stage in the succeeding essays for that definition to evolve through travel.

In my second essay, "Wait," I use examples of various hardships I've encountered while traveling, more explicitly countering romanticized accounts in the travel narrative, while implicitly humanizing one of my main reasons to continue to travel despite the trouble it brings me. These hardships, such as getting sick and not having a lot of money for things like food or

electricity, show how traveling can be just as upsetting and difficult as life at home can be to add to my previous argument in the first essay. Now not only have I shown you can't escape alcoholism through travel, you also cannot escape money issues or illness. Through my reading of *The Best American Travel Writing 2018* and *2019*, I inferred that these are two of the main stereotypes of travel that often discourage people from doing so since almost none of its writers discussed these topics directly. Whether it be that they never experienced these issues while traveling before or subscribe to the notion that writing about them isn't appealing I'll never know, but I think the latter is most likely. This is partially why I thought these issues were even more important to illustrate and address directly.

At the same time I directly address how the fleetingness of travel can make people do things they wouldn't normally do in day-to-day life in a familiar setting. Through my continual hardships while traveling in the essay coupled with the idea of travel's fleetingness having an effect on our rationality, I claim that traveling makes those hardships worthwhile in the long run. The introduction of important people I met during these hard times while traveling humanizes my reasons to continue to travel, literally giving readers a name and a face to attach to that reason. This makes my reader more ready to sympathize with my desire to travel and meet new people. This is important for the upcoming essay as I begin to more directly address the issues I have with people at home in the United States, specifically family, surrounding their ideas on these issues outside of travel.

In my third essay, "Homecoming," I directly address the themes of alcoholism and the effect my mother's drinking has had on my own drinking habits now that I've recently turned 21 years old. Specifically, while at holiday parties with her side of the family and what drinking around the family of an alcoholic feels like. For this reason, each section depicts a different

holiday I've experienced either in the United States or abroad where I had a different meaning of home in each. Aside from one scene from my childhood, all these scenes of holidays home and abroad are within the span of about one year of each other. This establishes that while my definition of home does evolve over the years through my traveling, home feels different to me depending on where I am, and more specifically, who I'm with.

The second to last section of the essay shows my mother's side of the family forcing me into a holiday family picture with my mother. I establish that this party is a holiday tradition I've been accustomed to for years but the indifference from my family at my mother's emotional abuse of me as a child causes me to feel out of place within my own family. I use a series of short, choppy sentences while my aunt counts down the picture in order to get the reader to read faster and convey how anxious I was feeling in that moment. This moment also serves to add to the theme of home by showing that your real family, your blood-related family, can make you feel more uncomfortable than strangers you meet and make friends with abroad. This scene is immediately followed by my first holiday back in the state where I was born but didn't grow up in now that my dad has moved back there. A home that is traditionally supposed to be my home but I have no memories or traditions for, yet I illustrate that I feel much more at home there than with the family I've always seen on holidays through this juxtaposition of the people I'm with in each. My mother's family forcing me to take a picture, making me feel uncomfortable against the easygoingness of my dad's side of the family through our relaxing game of pool.

My fourth essay, "Claimed," reveals the culmination of my search for home by focusing on my first time traveling alone for an extended period of time. This experience that is often looked at as frightening and lonely ultimately reveals to the reader and myself that travel has given me the tools to be confident and strong enough to find my own home. I recount important

connections and lessons I learned from people I met while traveling on this solo adventure that culminates in the final scene in Athens where I directly address the key to a home is having people there that will claim you. At this point I've earned the right to speak explicitly about why it is the people you meet that make a place home, not only humanizing the idea of home but solidifying it and giving it a tangible definition with examples to back it up.

In the second section of the essay where my friend, Carsten, takes care of me while I'm sick I circle back to the themes of hardships through illness and countering romanticized travel narratives while introducing its connection to home. In "Wait," I illustrate my desire to continue to explore while traveling regardless of my illness and other hardships, even though I directly express my want to stay in my hostel bed instead. This is something I point out that I would not normally do if I were home. In this essay, however, I do the opposite. I am more than happy to do what I would normally do at home by sitting and watching Netflix all day. The difference being I am now with Carsten, someone I made a home and friendship with previously through travel. This shows that my experience with Carsten taking care of me while I'm sick shifts my visit from traveling to see Germany to traveling to see him, reiterating the argument from previous essays that it is the people we are with that makes a place a home. This example along with the other scenes in the final essay allow me to speak directly about the definition of home, along with its connections to the other themes woven into the previous essays, in the final scene in Athens to present a tangible definition of home amidst this "age of movement" (Iyer).

It was not originally the plan to include an epilogue. However, amidst the COVID-19 outbreak and travel restrictions beginning in the United States I found myself in Europe trying to get back home. During this time of uncertainty throughout the world I was uncertain of whether or not I would be able to go home, making me realize that whether I travel to find other homes or

not, the United States will always be the place I need to go back to. I come to realize this through the home new friends and I make in the hostel that we are unsure of at the time if it will literally become our home if we cannot get back to our home countries. This epilogue is really important to the project as a whole because it legitimizes my own definition of home in a way I did not originally intend it, showing that it applies even when you don't want it to. Since I make it clear throughout my project that I want to travel and live outside of the United States because I don't feel at home there, my insistence to get back there proves it was a home for me after all due to my connection with the people there such as friends and family. Once all the friends I make at the hostel leave to go home I will no longer have anyone in Lisbon to claim me, making me want to go back to the United States, proving to myself that this is the key to a place being a home.

In the beginning of this project, I aimed to counter romanticized stereotypes within the travel narrative. While aspects of my collection do this, it more broadly argues an unconventional and nontraditional definition of home that more accurately fits into the contemporary "age of movement," as defined by travel writer Pico Iyer. At the conclusion of this project, I plan to seek publication for the essays in the collection individually in various literary magazines and websites, such as Terrain, Ecotone, and Flyway. Additionally, I plan to potentially add to the collection to expand the essays into a book-length memoir. I believe this project effectively added a new perspective to the travel narrative by countering stereotypes common to the genre surrounding the reality of travel, alcohol's role in travel, and the meaning of home.

Irish Whiskey Feels More Like Home

Western Massachusetts, USA, Spring 2013

I begin to dial 911 as my mom yells at me and calls me a *dumb bitch, slut, cunt*, and other classic mother-daughter pet names from the kitchen floor of our three-bedroom apartment. My younger brother and sister cry around her, not sure yet if I'm helping or hurting the situation. I'm hiding in my room doing homework for my high school freshman classes when my younger brother and sister call to me from the kitchen. I call my dad asking him what to do after finding my mom beet red, fallen on the floor, slurring her words beyond recognition, having difficulty breathing. He tells me to call 911.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Hi, um, my mom is on the kitchen floor and having trouble breathing," I say when they answer, while my nine-year-old brother desperately tries to make my mother breathe in and out of a brown paper bag he uses to take his lunch to school.

"Has she been drinking?" the 911 operator asks.

"Yes."

After I hang up, before I can even make out what my mom is attempting to yell at me this time, I run over to our neighbor's house, like my dad told me, to tell them what's going on. Our neighbor comes over to wait with us for the police, who then wait with us for the paramedics.

"My dad said he's on his way to the hospital from work now," I tell one of the paramedics while the others begin loading my mom onto a gurney. My brother and sister are on either side of me crying into my shoulders, or the closest they can reach. Suddenly everyone in the kitchen is rushing out the door, the sirens on.

We lost our house a little over a year ago and since then have been living in this apartment, the last place I will ever share with my mom—a stranger to me who makes me feel unsafe in my own home

Galway, Ireland, Summer 2017

I walk down one of the cobblestone streets that scatter throughout Galway, Ireland with my new friend, Brianna. The street is lined on both sides with two-to-three-story buildings all cramped next to each other and fight for our tourist-attention. They do this just as much as the street itself is cramped with people, interestingly enough, doing the same thing.

Arguably, some of the most touristic streets in Galway are seamlessly connected pedestrian-only streets seemingly filled with just as many buskers as there are tourists. Of course we come to expect this in the years to follow and change our plans accordingly to avoid it all, but on this uncharacteristically warm summer night that's still light out at 10pm we're still naïve tourists with the sun setting softly just behind us as we walk in the opposite direction of Galway Bay, heading toward the pubs.

Ireland is stereotypically known for drinking, so we want to drink. Since I'm 18, I've barely drank up until this point because I'm afraid of becoming like my mom. Just a couple bottles of Mike's Hard Lemonades along with Malibu and Cokes here and there.

I don't drink like my mom whose addiction changes who she is into a stranger I don't recognize. Her way of drinking is the only way I've seen drinking all my life. My dad made sure we never saw him drink while we were growing up, due to my mom's drinking. Drink and be a drunk or don't drink at all.

I want to see what a normalized, destigmatized drinking culture looks like. I want to have the experience of drinking in an Irish pub where my drinking won't automatically be viewed as a possible addiction. Even though it's but a small part of the Irish culture, it's a part of the culture nonetheless, and I want to experience every last bit of it. Irish whiskey and all.

Brianna and I, though, are the only ones on this university trip that seem to want to experience that side of the culture. Going to Ireland without visiting the Guinness Factory or going to a single pub is like going to Paris without seeing the Eiffel Tower—you feel like you're missing out on something. Then we would have just flown over six hours across the Atlantic Ocean to step foot on a small surface area of the 32,000 square-mile hunk of dirt and rock that is still just smaller than the state of Indiana, where sheep block roadways and the grass really is greener.

That isn't Ireland, or at least not all of it. And again, we want to experience it all. It only scratches the surface, literally. The alcohol is not so much the main event, but a sweet bonus of pub culture for those that choose to partake. The best thing about pub culture in Ireland is the sense of community you feel when you're there amidst all the music and history strewn about every pub in the country. But since this is my first time being able to drink in bars and pubs, I want to try to experience that too, along with Ireland's famous community pub culture. On this two-week university summer travel course to the Emerald Isle of over fifteen other students, there is only one other student other than myself that wants to do more than scratch the surface of the touristic sites and gift shops.

So Brianna and I step foot outside our hotel with the intent on having an authentic night out in Ireland filled with Irish whiskey and a destigmatized drinking culture. A drinking culture we would later attribute many of the friends we would make over the years to, from habitual trips

back to the home of Jameson whiskey, always giving us yet another reason to return the next time until one day we'll have no choice but to stay.

Until then, we will look back on this first night as the time we realize that Ireland's destigmatized drinking culture and pub community turns strangers into friends and friends into family with the ease of a pint. A different kind of addiction.

Western Massachusetts, USA, Fall 2010

I'm ready to go. Tonight's the night of yet-another-middle-school-dance that my friends and I are so excited for. It will escape me later in life what exactly I'd wear to these dances since we never take any before or after pictures for them. Future me will be relieved no pictures exist.

I slip my slide-out keyboard Samsung into the back pocket of my jeans and run down the stairs of my childhood home, resisting the urge to ride down the banister like I had done so many times before. Having lived in this house since I was three years old and being fairly unsupervised by my mother any time past noon, a kid has a lot of time on their hands to explore what they can and can't do at home.

Sliding down the banister, you can.

Jumping off the top of your bunkbed into a pile of pillows, you can.

Bringing your little sister down the stairs in a bin full of toys, you can't. That results in denting your left cheek bone on the front door doorknob at the bottom of the stairs after you fall.

But this time I restrain myself from acting childish. I'm older now, more mature, sliding down the banister is for kids, which I most definitely am not anymore.

Not since I figured out I had the choice between being hungry until my dad gets home from work and figuring out how to cook.

Not since I realized that I had the choice between having my mom in the morning and having a stranger drunk on the couch in the afternoon.

Not since I figured out I had the choice between staying perfectly quiet in my room after school and spending my day being called a cunt in the comfort of my own home.

“I’m ready to go!” I say as I walk down the stairs. No response. My mother is right there on the couch, passed out, with an empty glass cup knocked over just next to the arm she has draped onto the floor. I really like dances because it’s an excuse not to be in the house all night with her. Not just dances. I do this all the time, finding and even inventing clubs with my friends in order to stay at school so I didn’t have to go home for as long as possible.

My ride to the dance is clearly not as ready as I am. I’m ready to tear up that dance floor with my friends I’ve known throughout all of elementary school and make some new ones in the process. I just need to get there. With every second that passes the feeling in my stomach that often comes when I’m afraid gets bigger, begging my mom not to wake while knowing at the same time that she has to. Sometimes the things you think will be the easiest, like waking your mom up to drive you to a dance, are the things that end up being the hardest.

Like having a piece of lasagna your mom made for dinner. Instead of her hiding it in her room so you can’t eat anything.

Like grabbing a seltzer bottle out of the fridge before school. Instead of the seltzer turning out to be straight vodka.

Like getting into the car with your mother. Instead of her being too intoxicated to drive but she does anyway, and you have to get in every time because you don’t have a choice.

County Mayo, Ireland, Spring 2018

I'm in Ireland again for spring break and it feels like home. It's just a few months after my first trip to Ireland on the university study tour. I missed it too much that I really didn't have any other choice but to come back.

An Irish friend I met on my last night out in Galway during the study tour told me I was always welcome to stay with him and his mum, Mary Jane, out in County Mayo whenever I came back. So I took him up on the offer the first chance I got...with a plus one. I decided to take Brianna along because it felt wrong to have one without the other, Ireland without my travel buddy, a house without a home.

"Good morning girls," Mary Jane greets us with a motherly, sing-song tone. "How did you sleep?"

"Really well," we both say. "Thank you," I add before asking my friend for some of the cereal he was eating at the kitchen table. Brianna hangs back looking a bit hesitant, trying to figure out what she'll be having for breakfast. She's been vegan for years. Mary Jane notices her hesitation and tries to comfort her.

"Don't worry dear," Mary Jane begins with a small smile. "My son told me that you were vegan so I got you something you can have," she starts over towards the cupboard above the stove with a little skip in her step to take something down, very excited to show Brianna what she had gotten her. "I got some cereal that's dairy-free so it's vegan for you and of course you can have tea."

"Wow, really? Thank you so much, I really appreciate it," Brianna says.

"You're welcome," Mary Jane says with a pleased look on her face. Her round face is complemented by accented cheekbones that become even more prominent when she smiles, her

cheeks getting the smallest hint of pink. Her frizzy bed-head blonde hair is all up in a curly bun in an attempt to look put together this morning, even if only for our benefit. I'm a bit surprised that she's even up this early with us at all since she isn't the one driving into Galway today. This makes me think of my own home growing up. How my mom wouldn't even get up to drive me somewhere in the middle of day, let alone early in the morning just to say good morning.

I feel more at home in this house in the Mayo countryside with an Irish friend I met last summer, his mum I just met last night, and my Ireland-loving best friend than I did in the United States in my own house with my own mother when I was growing up. I'm starting to realize it's not the place but the people that make the home.

"While I have you both here, I want to show you where we keep the tea," Mary Jane points to a cupboard, interrupting my train of thought. "And the cups, and you're welcome to anything in the fridge or cupboards." I smile in shy gratitude at this hospitality I'm clearly unaccustomed to since it doesn't seem to faze Brianna. I remember her mom is maternal and caring like this too. "Do you girls want a cup of tea now?"

Before we can answer, even though I've still got a couple more mouthfuls of cereal left and Brianna hasn't even sat down to eat yet, her son, our unofficial tour guide for the week, answers, "We've actually got to be heading off, Mum, I've got to be at work soon."

I look at my phone and it is indeed time for us to hit the road. Brianna and I say our goodbyes to Mary Jane as she gives us some recommendations on where to get breakfast in Galway and tells us to drink a bit of whiskey to keep warm. As we pull away from the house, we hear her yell to us from the front door to be safe today. My friend rolls his eyes in the front seat before he pulls away. While he is so accustomed to this small act of love, I am really feeling a

part of the family. It gives me a tingly feeling all over my body that I try to hold on to during the whole car ride.

I do so by reminding myself that we won't worry Mary Jane at all since we already did all the touristy stuff the last time we were in Galway on the university study tour.

We'll find our home for the day in a restaurant trying new food, in a coffee shop finding the vegan options, in an old bookstore looking through all the Irish literature, or in a cozy corner of a pub keeping warm with Irish whiskey. We may even try to brave some outdoor sightseeing along the water, which will probably be quiet if not silent since Ireland in March is not the ideal time to go near the beach, but that's why we have the whiskey.

I like to think that Mary Jane will be proud.

Western Massachusetts, USA, Spring 2013

Everything has changed for the better after my mom got alcohol poisoning last week on the kitchen floor of our apartment. She's fine, she survived and all that, but barely with a .220 blood alcohol level. She's lucky, but she's not allowed to live with us anymore. We're at the courthouse right now to make sure of it.

I'm fourteen years old and this is the first time in my life I've ever been able to come home from school knowing I won't get verbally abused. The first time I don't feel powerless and helpless every day of my life in the one place I'm supposed to feel free, heard, and loved. The first time I feel safe in my own home.

I'm testifying with a court psychologist, I think, so they can testify on my behalf during the actual hearing in a couple hours.

“Can you explain, in your own words, some of the things that would happen when you got home from school each day while your dad was at work?” she continues to ask probing questions like this for about an hour. I tell her everything.

I tell her how I found out about my mother’s alcoholism when I was ten years old. My mom was on some girl’s weekend getaway with her friends in New Hampshire. My dad and I were watching a movie after my brother and sister fell asleep and he got a call from a police station up there. She’d been arrested for drunk driving, the first of her two DUI convictions, although I believe she would go on to be arrested for more than that but not all that she was formally convicted of in court.

But in New Hampshire, she needed to be bailed out of jail. I was still awake when they came home later that night, which my mom was very unhappy about. She was still a little drunk I think. Since my brother and sister were asleep throughout the whole night, they wouldn’t find out about this until years after her alcohol poisoning. But since I was awake and aware of what was going on to some extent, my mom subconsciously decided to blame me in some way. Like my knowing about her DUI was the thing that made her an alcoholic.

This is how my ten-year-old self rationalized the future verbal abuse. Even if my mom didn’t quite realize it herself, after that night she treated me differently than my siblings when she was drunk. She treated me like a stranger in my own house, someone who was a threat and a nuisance to her and my siblings’ way of life.

An outsider.

I’m still not quite sure if she remembers how she treats me the next day after she sobers up, but nothing is the same for me again. Nothing and nowhere that we live feels like home when she is in it because when she is drunk, she is a stranger to me too.

I tell the court psychologist how early on after that night, my mom would go on walks around the lake we lived near, get a big cheap plastic-bottle full of vodka from the convenience store, and be hammered by the time she got back. I told her how she recently found the green leather-bound journal I kept to keep track of everything that happened on the more eventful days after I got home from school so I'd remember what to tell my dad when he got home, which I'd forget to do anyway.

“What do you mean by that?” The court psychologist asks right around this point.

“I have trouble remembering what happens with my mom when something big happens, so that when my dad gets home and he asks how everything was today I just say ‘fine’ because I can’t remember anything to tell him, so for a while he didn’t really know that anything was wrong,” I say, looking over at my dad.

My mom screamed at me for hours the night she found my green leather-bound journal. It was a record of everything mean or bad she'd ever said or done to me since I started keeping it in middle school. It was how I coped.

I honestly can't remember everything about it because she took the thing that I wrote everything down in. But I know she confronted me very shortly after I got home from school that day. As soon as she did the all-too-familiar feeling in my stomach returned to its usual pain and size. Starting out as a grape then quickly getting up to grapefruit level depending on how loud and what she called me that time. This time it was almost enough to double me over in fear.

She was screaming at the top of her lungs throwing the green journal in my face repeatedly. I can't even remember what she said, but whatever it was, she screamed and screamed, coming in to scream for a bit, going back into the living room, then coming back unannounced again. The torture was not knowing when she'd be back in.

I know she called me all the usual names: *slut*, *stupid bitch*, *whore*, *cunt*. I tell the court psychologist all of this and she's shocked.

It's funny how the names people call you can stick in your brain more than anything else they say. How the hurtful words are the thing we remember most, even if we can't remember anything else. How we strive to do everything in our power to never be called the name again.

Galway, Ireland, Summer 2018

Despite all my efforts throughout my life to never be called those names by anyone ever again, sometimes things just don't work out the way you want them to. I decide to live in Ireland for a whole summer on a working holiday visa only a couple of months after my spring break trip staying with Mary Jane.

I'm all moved into my new apartment for the summer in Galway and met up with some friends I met in the hostel I stayed in before my apartment was ready. Podge is one of these people, and he works for the hostel running the nightly pub crawls around town. We immediately hit it off a couple of days ago when I first got to the hostel, so I decided to keep in touch after I moved into my apartment.

I feel even more at home here than I ever thought I could. A feeling I'd forgotten how to feel after all these years. A feeling I thought I'd left on the kitchen floor of our old family apartment beside that brown paper bag my little brother used to bring his lunch to school.

"Fucking cunt," Podge yells at me from the other end of the cobblestone street shortly before all the pubs close.

There it is again. *Cunt*. I can't seem to escape it.

I can't remember him saying anything else but that word. I only remember that hurtful word that continues to get drunkenly slurred to me in my life.

I stop in my tracks. A McDonald's paper bag in my hand, the contents acting as a whiskey sponge and comforting reminder of home I was trying to leave behind. All the while that word is acting as a grossly uncomfortable reminder of it. I don't know what's worse, the torture of not knowing when he'll begin yelling again or that he reminds me so much of my mother. Never able to stop drinking day or night and letting his addiction change him into a stranger I wish I didn't recognize.

Throughout the pub crawl Podge brought everyone on earlier tonight, he had taken it upon himself to go hard on the Jameson shots and pints of Irish cider. The alcohol really started to set in about five minutes ago when he chased me out here on the street, mad I didn't want to stay and put up with his drunkenness.

Not unlike my mom chasing me into my room when she found my green leather-bound journal.

Having made this comparison to Podge's familiar state and my mother's years of a unique brand of parenting, I realize that there are certain things I already know you can and can't do on a night out in Ireland that I would finally learn I could take with me everywhere.

Make stupid decisions, you can.

Make the decision to stop drinking too much Jameson, you can.

Make a decision for someone else, you can't. That results in a lot of unresolved frustration with yourself and them. But this time I restrain myself from trying to will someone else to be better. I'm older now, more mature than when I lived in fear of my mom's drunken

slurs. Continuing to argue with a drunk calling you a *cunt* is for kids, which I most definitely am not anymore.

So I turn on my heel on the cobblestone street and walk away from Podge. I'm not the girl trapped in her room forced to listen to a drunken stranger with a green leather-bound book in their hand yelling at me above my bed anymore.

Not since I learned I have the choice between letting names hurt me and walking away from them.

Not since I learned I have the choice between being family by blood and being family by love.

Not since I learned I have the choice between somewhere being a place that I live and somewhere being a home.

Wait

Dublin, Ireland, Winter 2019

I'm able to hold back from throwing up just long enough to get off the bus with my suitcase. At least I don't throw up on the bus, or worse, on anyone.

"Brianna," I ask as my travel companion, who also gets off the bus behind me, looking concerned. "Can you please ask any of the store owners here if they have a plastic bag or something?"

"Of course," she replies, leaving her suitcase with me and running towards the stores that line the sidewalk as I heave again.

I know exactly how this looks. A young twenty-something American girl who partied too hard last night in Galway or Limerick now hungover on her bus ride into Dublin and all over the sidewalk at 7 o'clock in the morning to the dismay of fellow bus-goers and passersby on their own ways into the city. At least they have an interesting story to tell around the water cooler this morning.

Too bad it's an entirely inaccurate one.

But a young American girl with food poisoning from the plane food she got on her red-eye flight from the United States last night is too pitiful to laugh at, so I don't tell them otherwise.

"None of them have any," Brianna reports back. I think the ban on plastic in Ireland recently went into effect but I don't have the energy to speak.

I simply nod, wipe the puke from my chin with the back of my hand, grab my suitcase, and start toward the direction of our hostel. I may be sick, but at least I'm sick in Ireland.

And it's not the first time.

Up until this point, I've visited Ireland a few times, living here one of those times for the summer. I've managed to have gotten sick one way or another. Every. Single. Time. Luckily, each sickness couldn't outweigh the experiences I got to have.

My first visit on a university tour outweighed the strep throat, or tonsillitis as the doctor in Dublin called it.

My second visit staying with a friend and his mum in County Mayo outweighed getting strep throat again.

My third visit when Brianna and I decided to live in Galway for the summer outweighed getting strep throat yet again.

Apparently, I've decided to spice things up a bit with a little food poisoning. Just to keep my immune system on my toes.

Little do I know, keeping my immune system on its toes will become the theme of my next five months traveling on my way to studying abroad in Greece and on trips during the semester. Since I'm no stranger to being sick while traveling I've learned you have to make the best of it or you'll regret it after you get home. You don't spend all that time and money planning this trip just to let it get ruined by your health. I don't know about you, but I am actually just that stubborn.

Should I be home and have food poisoning or strep throat, of course I'll be in bed for the day taking all the necessary precautions to make a speedy recovery. My job and classes will be there waiting for me when I return. But the same thing doesn't go for traveling. A lot of times I'm here today and gone tomorrow so I have to make the best of my situation by seeing and doing everything I came to regardless of anything else.

Travel is fleeting, and in many cases, temporary. This is a very different feeling than I get from my daily life that is generally the same day in and day out. If I don't do it today I'll do it tomorrow or next week, but with travel that is never a guarantee so I feel more motivation and excitement to get more things done. I feel more motivation to be productive in sightseeing or making new friends. You never know the next time you'll have the opportunity to explore Dublin's city center, hike in rural Germany, or spend the day in a bathhouse in Budapest.

Budapest, Hungary, Spring 2019

My experience in Budapest surprisingly makes me miss the food poisoning in Dublin. Budapest starts off my 2-week solo backpacking trip around Eastern Europe during my Easter break from my classes in Greece, a trip I've been planning all semester.

Now finally after climbing over 300 steps I'm at the top of St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest, Hungary so I can see what I came to see all at once. The 360 degree view of Budapest is mesmerizing and a lot to take in. It takes me a few good laps around before I feel like I really soaked it in and can start taking pictures.

My stomach has other ideas.

I start to impulsively keel over in an attempt to subdue the raging stomach pain I've been battling for the past three days that I've been here. I still have the same inkling as to why exactly my stomach has been hurting so bad as when it started upon my arrival here. *Egyik sem* as they say in Hungarian. The word I'd learned to say at every restaurant I went to with some Canadian friends I met at my hostel since a side effect of this stomach pain has been an inability to eat or even want to. *None*.

Being curled up in a ball on my bunk at the hostel sounds a lot more appealing than doing it on the top of a famous church while other tourists mumble and laugh in languages I don't understand as they squeeze by me. At least in Dublin I was in a somewhat familiar city with a familiar face.

"Alyssa, are you okay?" my Canadian friend, Amandeep, asks after squeezing by me.

"It's my stomach again," I tell him as I try to stand, but wince at the pain and settle back into my ball.

"Here let me help you up."

"Thanks," I say as he takes me by both of my hands and slowly uncurls me from my ball and gets me standing. He's a good head taller than me when I'm not slightly bent over in pain, which he used to his advantage the past few days being able to see over crowds to see where we were going, also making it easier for us to get the bartenders' attention.

"Do you think you'll be able to go to the baths tomorrow?" he asks, concern growing on his face. He's concerned for my health while I'm concerned I'll miss out on experiencing something so unique to the city I've grown to love with a group of friends I've grown to love. This is an experience with a group of people I will never get again.

Sure, I can always come back to Budapest one day maybe. Even if I do and I'm completely healthy, none of my friends I've met over the past few days will be here with me. And maybe if I am somehow able to organize a reunion years from now right at this very spot on the top of St. Stephen's Basilica, it won't be the same.

Amandeep and his friends won't be on their post-graduation tour around Europe, our other Canadian filmmaker friends won't be traveling for the first time, and I won't be on my solo Easter break trip while studying in Greece. Traveling changes people. All our individual trips

like this one and the ones to come will change us. The next time we meet we will be shaped and altered by our experiences yet to come. And it won't be the first time that I've met them. Places may not change much, but people and circumstances do, which changes the experience altogether. Plus, thermal spring water at the baths might even cure my stomach, but there's only one way to find out.

“I wouldn't miss it for anything.”

Brussels, Belgium, Mid-Summer 2018

Everyone is staring at us. Not in a good way or really in a bad way but more of a who let these disheveled, lost-looking girls on this tour kind of way.

“I think it's the spaghetti,” I whisper to Brianna in the bus seat next to me. We look down at our lunch for today, something we were actually very proud of when we made it this morning. Cold spaghetti shoved neatly into little leftover plastic bags last night's chocolate truffles came in, just a little smaller than the size of my hand. It's clever enough to save us money on buying lunch today while we're on our day tour to a city in Belgium during our weekend visit to Brussels.

“They probably think we're so poor,” Brianna laughs. “We honestly look like peasants eating cold spaghetti from a plastic chocolate bag.”

“Brianna, we *are* so poor,” I remind her, laughing at our situation. She's right though, and being on a tour bus filled with well-off couples and their children is an obvious reminder of that because we are definitely the odd ones out. Two twenty-something girls traveling by themselves on a food budget of less than 20 euros each for the whole weekend.

But it's well worth it.

We bought the plane tickets, hostel, and tours well in advance of the trip so the only thing we really needed to pay for when we got here was food and extra expenses. It's a good thing we did too, because we were nearly completely broke by the time the trip snuck up on us a couple days ago.

All summer we have been living and working in Ireland on working holiday visas, a temporary visa that allows students and recent graduates from certain countries to work certain jobs in Ireland in order to supplement their holiday there for up to a year. Being as in love with the country of Ireland as the two of us are, we applied for these visas immediately upon finding out about them only about a month before we came at the beginning of the summer. It then took another month for me to finally get a job and by that time my funds were nearly scarce.

We've just barely been scrapping by. But we aren't noticing that part as much as you'd think.

Luckily, we have our own little group of friends from the hostel we stayed at upon arrival in Galway so we've been enjoying getting to know them all and having low-cost adventures around the city together. Hanging out in Eyre Square, walking down by Salthill, and the occasional photoshoot or two.

After I'd been working for a couple months at my job, Brianna and I realized we hadn't traveled as much as we had planned to because I was always working or we had plans with our friends. Then of course there was the slight issue of no money. Being the typical broke college student I've always had no money to speak of, but this feels different here, almost more exciting. Living on the edge of the poverty line in the United States doesn't feel quite as productive as it does doing so in another country. We have no money either way, may as well get a cultural experience out of it. At least this is something we don't necessarily need all that much money

for. The end of the summer upon us, we decided to book a weekend on the cheapest flight we could find, which turned out to be to Brussels, Belgium.

Fast forward to a couple days ago when I still hadn't gotten paid from the hotel because my bank account couldn't be set up, my check from my university still hadn't come through, and I had about 25 US Dollars in my home bank account. Since the plane tickets were already booked, this is when we decided it was a good idea to set off to Brussels.

It was a neutral idea at best.

"It's better than the leftover sandwiches we made from the hostel the last couple of days," Brianna points out to me, slurping up a noodle.

On the tour yesterday, we brought sandwiches we made from the leftovers of our hostel's complimentary breakfast. Baguettes cut in half filled with lettuce and tomato we wrapped up in a bunch of napkins and shoved into our backpacks. While the sandwiches may have seemed like a more normal lunch to our fellow tourers, they weren't as tasty as our spaghetti today. Plus the looks on everyone's faces who had the money to go out to eat at the restaurant our tour guide suggested, is the free show this lunch is missing.

I don't remember exactly what everyone on the bus is doing or saying but I know it's all going to be a part of a hilarious story Brianna and I remember for a long time. Maybe even longer than what we actually did and saw on our tour.

Galway, Ireland, Late summer 2018

Despite all the hardships Brianna and I have experienced over the course of our travels together, we keep coming back for more.

Nothing that anyone says and nothing that happens can sway us from that refreshing drink of exploration and adventure. Sometimes I can't decide if it's a sheer lack of caring about our inconveniences, stubbornness, or a drive to travel but I do know one thing for certain.

No matter how much I travel and experience these issues, I'm never prepared for what the next one might be.

"Brianna," I yell upstairs just after the lights in our apartment turn off, "it finally happened." She just laughs in response from her room at the top of the stairs. Both of us have been waiting for this day to come.

We haven't topped up the electricity meter for our apartment in Galway since it nearly hit zero the last time we checked, but the lights have stayed on anyway. Until Now.

We thought it would be more immediate. No money, no lights. We don't really understand how the meter works so we knew at any moment the electricity could go off for good. It's quite unsettling.

"Where did we put the candles?" she yells down. Ah yes, our candles we bought at Primark at the beginning of the summer because they were on sale and we had *joked* about needing them to save money on electricity. Well, I guess this is a roundabout way of making us save money.

"I've got them," I say as she comes down the stairs wrapped in one of our matching big pink fuzzy blankets that we also each got at Primark on sale. I'm wearing the other one.

I begin grabbing the packages of tea lights we stowed away on the windowsill. We probably have about 100 tea light candles, but nothing bigger than that because this is what was on sale. Luckily, our stove still works. Apparently those last few cents we have on the meter is enough for the stove, just not the lights.

“Katie’s on her way over for girl’s night already isn’t she?” Brianna asks. I try to look at the time on the microwave but that’s off, so I check my phone.

“Yup, she’s probably already on the bus by now,” I answer. I try to think of something quick and easy Brianna and I can make for dinner on the stovetop before Katie gets here. I go over to the cupboard next to the stove and luckily, there is ramen.

Katie is a Canadian girl we met through the friends we knew from the hostel we stayed at before getting this apartment. Now we’re even closer with her than the person who introduced us. She’s about my height when she wears her little grey booties, which is almost always. Whether we’re going out for the night or not she always has perfectly smudged eyeliner under her eyes, something I’ve decided is her trade mark. She’s also a few years older than us, and since we figured out she doesn’t have a younger sister and I don’t have an older sister we’ve adopted each other.

My self-adopted Canadian big sister.

“So we’re going to be eating ramen noodles, in the dark, by candle light,” Brianna laughs. “Only us.”

“Don’t forget we’ll also be drinking wine for girls’ night...most likely out of the bottle,” I try to continue but we both break out laughing.

We may as well say *at least we all have each other* like the after school specials from the 90s I grew up watching. But I suppose there is some truth in it, for us anyway.

Everyone often asks Brianna and I how we afford to travel so much and even why we do it when it makes us so broke. Katie seems to get this question from her family and friends as well. Just in the past year this work visa to Ireland has been the third time Brianna and I have

been here. Our friends and family tend to have a preconceived notion about travel, an idea I've noticed in a lot of people around me lately.

That it's reserved for the rich, or at least those with a steady and expendable income. That if you don't have a solid savings account you need to wait to travel.

Wait.

Wait for what? Money? Time? Stability?

Travel isn't something I can wait for.

While that may be true of people going on extravagant vacations to spa resorts and all-inclusive cruises, I think there should be a distinction.

Between traveler and vacationer.

Travel writer Seth Kugel defines this distinction in his book *Rediscovering Travel: A Guide for the Globally Curious* through the motives of each group. That "vacationers want to escape, to relax, to eat well, and to get massages by their cabana's private plunge pool. Travelers want to see, to learn, to grow, to understand, to experience" (Kugel 86).

You can wait to escape or relax.

You can't wait to experience and understand.

The motivations are different and often confused by people like our friends and family who imagine us on these luxurious vacations relaxing by the pool. When in reality we're eating ramen noodles in the dark, drinking wine straight out of the bottle.

Or keeled over in pain on top of a famous church in Budapest. That's travel.

Making new lifelong friends through shared travel experiences. That's travel.

It has its highs that you can conveniently see plastered all over social media, but it also has its lows. Sometimes there are more lows than highs whether it be getting sick or not having

enough money to do what you want to do but it's up to you to decide if those highs make it worth it or not.

For me, getting a self-adopted Canadian big sister outweighs getting strep throat in a foreign country. Making friends that share the priority of travel outweighs my bank account starting back at zero every time I come home from a trip.

Meeting people outweighs the realities of travel.

Knock knock knock.

Katie's here.

Homecoming

Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Winter 2019-2020

“Sur s’dey chh’nam t’mey!” the four of us yell at any and all passersby on our way back to the hotel. Our less than 24 hours being in Cambodia so far is quite evident in our poor pronunciation of ‘Happy New Year’ in Khmer. Our tipsiness coming from the bar may also be a factor, but we decide to blame our unfamiliarity with the native language instead.

“Did you get the beers from the little store down the street?” I ask with a slight yawn as we head up the stairs of our hotel in Phnom Penh. The jet lag is real, but the need to count down to the New Year is more important.

After our long day of exploring the city earlier, I was in desperate need of a nap before tonight’s festivities. Then straight to the bar even though every bone in my body was begging me not to leave the comfort of my freshly made bed.

The girls who also came on this university teaching trip convinced me, though, with their far more awake and energetic demeanors. I don’t know how they aren’t exhausted from the thirty-plus hours traveling the ‘day’ before. But, I know I’ll be kicking myself in the morning if I miss the New Year’s Eve countdown.

Especially on a brand new continent.

“Yeah, I’ve got them in my room,” one of them answers me as we reach the lobby. “We got them right before we got you to go to the bar,” she says pointing to the other girls.

“Perfect,” I say. “So we’ll meet up on the roof to watch the fireworks in five?”

“Sounds good!”

Once on top of the roof of the hotel, beers in hand, we await the fireworks to signify the New Year. 2020 is upon us. The second year in a row I’m traveling at the start of the New Year,

but this year is the year I'll graduate from college, the year I'll hopefully get my first real job after college.

2020 is almost here. However, it's still a good 12 hours away for our friends and family back home.

At home, my friends are still at work or having lunch. Some are even still having breakfast as I message them pictures of my view of Independence Monument down below, a landmark they've probably never heard of that turns into New Year's Eve central over 8,000 miles away from them.

From the rooftop of the hotel I can see thousands of people crowding on the main road to get as close to the fireworks overhead as possible. The street directly below is full of colorful lights from tricked out tuktuks and neon bar signs while the main street beyond glows in yellow and white. The colors mostly emanating from the lit up Independence Monument and the other statues lining that main strip I'll come to use as my main point of reference in the weeks to come.

My home base.

The girls and I are still getting to know each other since the trip just started, but this night is exactly what we need. Apparently a few drinks and the excitement of the New Year is all it takes to open us up. We all immediately find common ground talking about boys and our love of travel. One of the girls and I decide to each open up another beer while the others smile pretty for their Instagram photos. I start to get that nagging feeling wondering if having a second beer is too much again.

Our bonding is cut short as we hear countdowns all out of sync at all the bars down below. We decide on a bar to join in with and keep all eyes on our phones seeing the fireworks go off before our phones strike midnight.

It's the New Year for me, but everyone's still in the past back home.

Western Massachusetts, USA, Summer 2011

Slap!

I'm ten years old buckled up in the backseat of my mom's white minivan with my brother and sister parked in my uncle's driveway in Bellingham, Massachusetts. It's my uncle's annual 4th of July party with all of my mom's side of the family, though this will be the only one that I remember when I get older.

"Don't talk back to me," my grandmother says to my mother, both of them just outside the driver's side of the car. This is my grandmother's final attempt to convince her daughter not to randomly drive us to Cape Cod after she had trouble forcing me buckled in the back seat and getting the keys into the ignition.

We are going to have a family reunion in Cape Cod later this month, but for some reason my mom feels inclined to drive the hour and a half there now. The whole family is here though, so it really doesn't make any sense to me.

I don't notice at the time, but all day my mother hasn't been drinking in front of my family, instead going back and forth to her car to fill up her cup of Coke. I put it together from a young age that the Coke my mom drank made her act the way she did towards me, but I never could figure out why.

My brother, sister, and I don't want to leave the party. We were playing with our cousins from Colorado that we only see once every few years, why would we go to Cape Cod? That's the kind of trip we usually plan for well in advance. No one told us we were going to Cape Cod today until right now. We were playing tag in the front yard and making my little cousin repeat

things in an Australian accent. For some reason the Banana Boat sunscreen song sounds better with an accent and distracted us longer than it should have from our game.

All of a sudden my Auntie Sharon, the one from Colorado, opens the passenger side back door of the minivan and puts a finger to her lips telling us to be quiet. That's when I realize I've been crying since being forced into the car by my mom. All three of us are.

"I need you guys to come with me," she asks us. I look over at the scene forming now with both my uncles trying to keep my mom from hitting anyone. I look away.

I quietly unbuckle, worried that the slightest noise might send that aggression and violence our way. Between the crying and that fear, I find it hard to breathe as I ease myself out of the car and help my brother and sister out as quietly as possible.

I don't know if everyone at the party in the backyard knows what's going on or sees us crying while sneaking into the house. But we file in behind my Auntie Sharon and sit down in the corner of the living room away from the view of the windows looking into the driveway and door entering from the kitchen.

Hiding. Or waiting. I'm not quite sure.

My brother and sister—who can't be more than seven and nine years old—are crying on either of my shoulders as we wait in fear for what happens next.

There's yelling and yelling and more yelling outside. Until there isn't.

Then my mom comes through the door in the living room.

I'm not exactly sure what she says to my Auntie Sharon, but something along the lines of giving back her kids and she's leaving with us whether anyone likes it or not. My brother, sister, and I bury our heads in each other's shoulders until we are asked to sneak outside. Our mom is nowhere in sight.

We get in the car with my Auntie Sharon's husband, Uncle Loyd and head for my grandparents' house, leaving our drunk mother behind with the rest of our family to deal with.

I guess this means we'll miss the fireworks this year.

Thessaloniki, Greece, Spring 2019

"So it's kinda like Halloween?" I ask my Greek friend, Evmorfe, as we walk into the costume store across the street from our class.

"No," she laughs. "Well, yes a little because we dress up, but that's it," she adds, which is good enough for me because Halloween is my favorite holiday.

"It's part of the Greek Carnival before Lent," she explains as we look through the various costume displays. The store is packed with people all looking for their last-minute Tsiknopempti costumes as well. "It literally translates to *meat Thursday*." We both laugh.

"Great day for me to be vegetarian," I continue to laugh.

"It's okay," she reassures me, as she always does since I met her in our shared journalism class in my first few days after coming to Greece for my semester abroad. "More than eating meat it is an excuse to drink, there are many parties in the streets in the center of the city."

Thessaloniki. The city that would come to feel like home over the course of the semester thanks to good friends I would make, like Evmorfe here helping me find a costume to properly celebrate a holiday I know little to nothing about. Meanwhile, back home in the States I'm missing my younger sister's 18th birthday.

I called her last night when it was midnight, therefore officially her birthday here. It was technically only the day before her birthday, thanks to the time difference and she was at work.

That didn't stop me though.

She didn't answer my calls at first, but I wanted to be the first one to wish her a Happy Birthday, even though it was technically still 6 hours away for her.

Over a year later, she still won't let me forget that I wasn't there on her 18th birthday. She calls me out on it every chance she gets but laughing while doing it so I know she isn't really *that* mad about it. That's something Evmorfe would do. She and my sister are actually a lot alike.

Outspoken.

Smart.

Sassy.

They are also much better with makeup and more fashion savvy than I am. It's a little embarrassing because they are both younger than me, making me feel like an old lady when they explain these things to me. Regardless, the both of them continue to teach me more about makeup and accessorizing than I ever thought I've needed to know. But I love them both for it.

"What should I be?" I ask as we browse through costumes of cats, clowns, and fairies. Even with Evmorfe's style expertise helping me like my sister would, trying to find the cheapest costume piece available to make a homemade costume is hard. Ten euros or under is the goal.

This reminds me of dragging my sister along to help me find a senior prom dress at a thrift store a few years ago when I was in high school. It feels wrong not to be there for her today on such a special occasion as she was always there for me. I'll try to make up for it by going all out on her on 19th birthday next year complete with taking her to get her nails done, throwing a party, and taking cute polaroid photographs of her and her friends for a commemorative picture board. But for now I take solace in Evmorfe's vivacious personality and ever-adventurous company.

“I don’t know, something pretty,” she replies. Always the fan of fashion and glamour.

“What about this?” She says, pointing to a rack full of metal gold-painted leaf crowns.

I go over to the rack to pick one up, trying to think if I’d packed anything white. I place it lightly on my head and look in a mirror nearby.

“Oooo,” Evmorfe squeals. “My beautiful Greek goddess, it’s perfect.” I roll my eyes and try to take off the crown before she can say anything else to make me blush.

I cannot.

“Well I’m glad you like it ‘cause it’s caught in my hair,” I laugh, unable to take the crown off without bringing half of my waist-length hair with me.

“See,” she laughs with a flair of I-told-you-so. “It’s meant to be,” she adds sassily before helping me carefully untangle it from my hair and bringing it immediately up to the cash register by the door.

As we walk outside, there’s a man grilling meat on a barbecue just outside the front door of the costume shop. He hands each of us a kebab of cubed meat, a few napkins, and says something in Greek that I don’t understand.

“Efcharistó,” Evmorfe replies with a smile. *Thank you*, in Greek, something I do actually understand. I thank him as well before we cross the street and I immediately hand her my kebab.

“Why did the costume store give us meat?” I ask, genuinely confused. A clothing store gave us food—is that even legal?

She laughs as she eats her kebab continuing on the way to my apartment to help me do my makeup and get ready for the street parties. We finally get to Aristotle Square a few blocks away from the costume store before she answers me.

“It’s Tsiknopempti,” she simply says, starting on my kebab with a snicker. Impossible sometimes, too. Just like my sister.

Western Massachusetts, USA, Fall 2019

I dread going to Thanksgiving with my mom’s family every year. Not because I don’t like my mom’s side of the family, I love them very much, but more because my mom is there. I feel like they all act differently around me when I’m around her. They all act extra cheerful, as she drinks sparkling cider with my younger cousins and I grab a Corona from my uncle’s cooler.

“Alyssa, can you come in the living room for a couple pictures?” my aunt yells to me from the other room. I take a quick sip before leaving my Corona on the window sill in the dining room.

My presence at family functions is still uncharted territory for all of us. I only recently began coming to them again a couple of years ago, which has become even more awkward now that I can legally drink at them.

Things came to a head with my mom’s alcoholism when she got alcohol poisoning, and my parents got divorced shortly after, so I haven’t had much of a relationship with my mom. In fact, once I turned 16 and was legally allowed to refuse visitations, I made sure we didn’t have a relationship because I didn’t want one. I even went so far as to hide in my room while my mom picked up my brother and sister for their scheduled visits and stopped going to her family events altogether.

It wasn’t until I got my driver’s license a couple years later and could drive myself that I slowly started going again. It lifted a weight that I didn’t even know could be lifted. The freedom of being able to leave at a moment’s notice just in case and have the ability to go as far away as I

pleased was helpful in dealing with her. While it physically gave me the option to be away from her, it also allowed me to be completely independent.

This feeling of freedom and independence allowed me to semi-comfortably see my mom's side of the family again.

Getting back into the swing of things and seeing her side of the family again was different than what I expected only because nothing had really changed. Everyone still acts like everything is normal. Like nothing happened.

Like their sister didn't recently almost die of alcohol poisoning.

Like their sister didn't recently get a divorce and lose physical custody of her kids.

Like they didn't find out how her sister emotionally abused their niece most of her life.

"Alyssa, get in the picture," my aunt says while holding up a camera in front of my brother, sister, and mom in the center of the living room.

"You can just take their picture," I say trying to be as polite as possible while also trying as hard as possible not to be in the picture.

"Don't be silly, get over here," my aunt says, pushing me towards my mom. I cringe. But I slowly make my way over, trying to put my brother and sister between us, but to no avail. I leave a couple inches between us, put on my best fake smile, and look at the camera. "Honey, move in closer."

I take the slightest step closer, irritated that no one realizes how uncomfortable this is making me. I don't know what is worse—that no one notices or that no one cares.

I know that everyone else in my extended family knows what happened. I'm not sure how much of the information from that day my aunt shared with the rest of my family or if she'd even decided to remember it herself.

I think we all put on fake smiles for holidays like this.

Slap on a smile, walk on some eggshells, and pretend life is perfect while talking about school and grades to avoid your real problems. This would be a candid slogan for the United States' national day of homecoming and kickoff to the family holiday season.

Pretend you fit in with a family that doesn't allow themselves to recognize the hypocrisy of scolding their drunk sister with a drink in each of their own hands. Forcing her estranged daughter to play nice with her mother while ignoring the daughter's discomfort in the situation since any tension might shed a bad light on their sister and their family. Oh no.

This is one of the reasons why I stopped going to these families parties a few years ago. It's all fake, overly peppy theatrics to convince guests—and themselves—that their family and lives are perfect.

“On the count of three,” my aunt says. “One...” My mom puts her arm around me and my smile falters for the faintest second, remembering. “Two...” How she used to drunkenly slur and scream at me every day when I was a kid. “Three...” How everyone tries to tell me it was the alcohol that did that, she was sick, it wasn't her fault. “Say cheese...” But it wasn't just the alcohol, she consciously treated her kid like that, and it was her fault.

Everyone acts like everything is normal.

Everyone acts like I love taking pictures with my mom because of course I have to, she's my mom. She's family. She's blood.

Just because you're related to someone doesn't automatically make them a good or nice person. Just because you live somewhere doesn't mean it makes you feel safe or happy.

Everyone acts like now that I'm legal to drink it's not weird that I drink around my mom, even though the juxtaposition makes me feel like I'm mocking her or afraid that I'm going to be like her. This is a feeling that follows me anytime I have a drink, everywhere I go.

It follows me to Greece.

It follows me to Cambodia.

It follows me to Ireland.

It follows me at home.

No matter how far I go or how long I travel, that feeling is still always in the back of my mind with every sip, regardless of how many 'perfect family' pictures my aunt takes of us.

Nothing they say or do now will ever take back that feeling my mom scared into me growing up before I found out family doesn't mean good, and a place to live doesn't mean home.

"Smile."

Southwest Florida, USA, Winter 2019

I walk over to the table to take a sip of my wine while my dad lines up his pool shot at the eight ball. My dad used to play pool all the time, or at least that's what he always told me. I haven't played in a good few months since I was in Greece. When I saw the pool table earlier in my uncle's garage, I knew I had to take advantage of this opportunity to brush up again. Kicking my dad's butt at pool will be a nice new Christmas tradition to start on top of now spending the holiday in Florida.

I was born here in Florida, just about an hour away from my uncle's house. Shortly after my younger sister and I were born my parents decided to move back up to their home state of Massachusetts to raise us closer to more family and have my younger brother. Now that my

parents are divorced, my dad decided to move back down here to be closer to his brother. This is my first Christmas outside of Massachusetts and it feels very bittersweet.

For all intents and purposes, Florida is my home.

Now that my dad and brother live here it's the place I'm supposed to always come back to for holidays and other family functions. But I've never actually lived here myself outside of the first three years of my life and I don't know anyone here other than the people in this house right now. My brother and sister aren't even here. They're spending Christmas with my mom, going to my aunt's Christmas Eve party and my other aunt's Christmas Day party.

We didn't have a party here last night and the party today is fairly small with my dad, uncle, aunt, and a couple of their friends. Even though I don't know anyone in this house outside of my family, it feels more comforting than any Christmas I've had in a long time.

If I were with my mother and her side of the family, I'd be waiting until the end of the party so we can all go home and I can watch tv with my dad while my brother and sister spend the night at my mom's house. Arguably, the best part of the day to go from all the pomp and circumstance to peace and quiet. I finally understand why my dad always enjoyed his peace and quiet.

Now I have that relaxing ease of not having to pretend to be comfortable or happy and just enjoy my peace and quiet all Christmas Day long. Smiling for real at my dad and uncle's continuous string of jokes. I can tell that I definitely get my sense of humor from my dad's side of the family because I'm able to jump in joking about our problems instead of actively avoiding them and pretending they don't exist. My dad and my uncle remind me how much healthier a coping mechanism humor is than denial.

I smile.

“Did you just beat me?” my dad laughs, noticing that I just sunk the eight ball. I nod.

“How long have you been playing pool?” I ask him, arrogantly.

“About thirty years.”

“Wow, I just started this year,” I begin, putting my pool stick down and replacing it with my glass. “I’m just gonna let Uncle Rick and Carol know who the new house champ is.” I laugh as I yell into the house announcing my victory to the only other people in the state that know I exist. They’re all I need anyway.

Claimed

Galway, Ireland, Beginning of January 2019

Looking out the window of the small, near-empty tour bus, I can see the many different shades of green spread out against the hills, vibrant with dew and rain. Small rain droplets race down my window, momentarily distracting me from taking in the beautiful sights of County Galway's Connemara landscape as I root for the raindrop on the far left to win.

This calms me. I've felt slightly on edge today with this being my first real solo trip. I plan to travel during the month of January during my winter break before my semester abroad in Greece begins. I will mostly stay with friends I've made on previous travels in Ireland, Germany, and Italy, before I ultimately end up in Greece to start my classes.

Solo travel with training wheels.

Especially considering I came to Ireland this time with my best travel buddy, Brianna to kick off the trip. I had to say goodbye to her yesterday when she went back home to the United States, leaving me all alone in a country I'd once called home when she and I lived here for the summer. I joked with Brianna before we hugged and she got on the bus that she was leaving me in capable hands of the girls we were rooming with at the hostel. Starting the only travel I've ever done without her with some lovely ladies that love our home just as much as we do. The four of us met a few days ago in the hostel when Brianna and I first got to Galway. While we all wouldn't be considered particularly outgoing, our small talk from our bunk beds about traveling and the city turned into plans to hang out that night. She was leaving me with people who would claim me in the same city, at least for a couple of days.

Even though Galway is home to me, I'd never felt more alone than I did walking back to my hostel from bringing her to the bus station.

I knew the names of every street I passed.

I'd been in every bar and convenient store I passed.

I had memories of every block and street corner between the bus station and my hostel, both of which I'd frequented countless times.

Yet I still had this unease in the pit of my stomach, this gnawing feeling that ate away at my feelings of home for this city and replaced them with feelings of being a stranger.

I knew no one in the city that still lived here. Brianna just left, all our friends from the summer before either moved back to their home countries and counties or moved to Dublin, and I was standing all alone in Eyre Square wondering how and why Galway first felt like home.

There was no one left in the entire city who would claim me and say they knew me aside from a few bartenders and bouncers that I'm not even sure if I would remember enough to claim myself.

"Would you girls like to stop to take some pictures here?" asks the tour bus driver. It's just me and the girls from the hostel. The three of us are the only ones on the tour since it's rainy and the offseason, so we've been getting the chance to stop and take pictures whenever we want.

"Absolutely!" one of the girls answers, already springing up from her seat beside me.

It's comforting to have friends that understand and feel that same need to travel that you do. It's relaxing to not have to explain why it's necessary to go here or there or why it's more important than the money. It's refreshing to have someone just understand the need to experience other cultures and meet new people. To actually want to listen to your travel stories if only to pick up tips for their next trip.

With this in mind, I get out of my seat on the tour bus to join the girls by a large lake, so still the reflection looks like an exact mirror image of the hills engulfing it. On the surface they

look exactly the same even though the green of the grassy hills and blue water can't be any more different.

But in this moment, I can't tell them apart.

Dudenhofen, Germany, Early January 2019

Carsten comes in the room holding two steaming hot cups of tea with honey and lemon. I'm sick again. The last couple weeks of traveling have worn me down I suppose. Carsten says he doesn't mind, but I feel bad. I haven't seen him in months since we were both living in Galway last summer where we met. We finally organize a time for me to come visit him in Germany and I get sick. My guilty conscience mentions this to him again as he hands me my cup.

"I've been meaning to watch this Netflix show anyway," he replies with a grin and a sly sip of his tea. Sometimes his accent makes it difficult to figure out if he's being sarcastic or not. He suddenly mutters something in German as his eyes grow wide and he quickly wipes his moustache covered lips of the tea, putting the mug down. "It's hot," he states, matter-of-factly.

I give him a sassy smirk as if he deserved it for maybe, possibly being sarcastic towards me as I smartly blow on my tea before setting it aside to cool.

Carsten is one of the best friends I made from working in Galway last summer. He was working in the hostel I stayed in before finding an apartment, but we really became friends one sunny afternoon on the banks of the Galway Bay where he taught me how to open a beer with a water bottle, a skill I won't soon forget and has come in handy more than I thought it would since.

Just as he took care of me then, he takes care of me now.

He and his parents have not only been welcoming since I arrived, but have also been so helpful and sweet since I've started to feel under the weather. Hunkered down in the basement with tea and Netflix and Carsten whilst I'm not feeling well has been oddly comforting and the closest tangible feeling of home I can think of.

Safe and sound under a pile of blankets arguing with Carsten about one topic or the next that has sprung from a Netflix series makes me feel secure. The only things that can hurt me now are my sore throat and Carsten's words, which always follow with regret and apologies and an offer to get more tea. I don't mind being cooped up in the house all day because I'm sick. Growing up though, I always felt the opposite.

I was the kid that went to school no matter how sick I felt. Fever? School. Strep throat? School. Throwing up? School. Not because I was forced, but because I didn't want to be home even when I was healthy, let alone when I was sick and vulnerable.

Being sick at home I'd hide in my room, anxiously awaiting the next outburst from my mother about something I was doing wrong. The morning was okay. She didn't have enough time to drink enough yet. But I always knew it was only a matter of time.

Only a matter of time before she would scream at me to take medicine I knew I didn't need. She would tell me I was faking whatever ailment that warranted me too ill to go to school. Get woken up and called a slut for no reason.

But not with Carsten.

"You know I could be up for that hike to that castle you were telling me about," I pipe up in between episodes.

"You're sick," he laughs, taking a sip of his, now, cooled tea.

“I know but I could do it,” I tell him, putting my hands on my hips like a Greek goddess, strong and ready for battle. He laughs again.

“You need to feel better first, then we can have fun and go places, here,” he grabs my empty mug between us, “I’ll get us some more tea,” he says as he jumps up and out of the room.

I don’t even want to go anywhere right now. It’s just nice to hear.

La Morra, Italy, Mid January 2019

The smells of homemade Italian pizza fill my friend, Chiara’s, kitchen. I’ve been staying at her house for the past week and now the basil and mozzarella combine in the oven on top of a perfectly kneaded Italian pizza dough. I would know because that’s been my job tonight. Well, mine and Gado’s.

Luckily for all of Chiara’s Italian friends, Gado and I are *both* on dough duty tonight. Earlier I asked Chiara where the rolling pin was and everyone looked at me weird. It seems using a rolling pin is as ridiculous as saying ketchup on bread is pizza. Those are obviously not the same things, just as a rolling pin is not allowed for making pizza dough. So that’s what we’ve been doing for the past hour. Properly making pizza dough.

All the other friends I made all this week are working on their respective jobs at making this little family dinner happen. Chopping up vegetables, making pizza sauce, getting the cheese ready, choosing the right wine. I never realized how seriously making food could be taken, especially just for a bunch of twenty-somethings.

Back at home, my friends and I were happy if we went over each other’s houses and we boiled some water for pasta. My family and I don’t have dinner together anymore, let alone all sit down at the same table together or make the same meal all together. I don’t think we’ve done

anything like that since I was maybe ten years old. Maybe even younger because I can't remember it. The closest thing we've done in a long time is all make our own meals and happen to sit down in front of the tv together while we eat them.

"No, no, no," Gado says to me during my first attempt at the pizza dough, shaking his head so hard that his hipster-frame glasses almost fall off into the flour between us. "With hands," he says in English.

"Mani? Perché? *Hands? Why?*" I reply, confused, trying to return the favor by speaking Italian for him. He only knows a little English and I only know a little Italian, so our communication this week has been a lot of this broken back and forth, but somehow, it's worked for us.

Even after I leave La Morra tomorrow, we will communicate through text by copying and pasting translations from the internet for the other person to read along with our original first language above it. There will be a few misunderstandings from poor translations regarding ketchup on pizza. While this will result in our decision to make *ketchup on pizza* curse words in both English and Italian, it's nothing we can't handle.

With the help of Chiara's boyfriend, who speaks near perfect English, Gado tells me that he used to work in a pizza shop when he was younger. Using a rolling pin takes the air bubbles out of the dough, which I gathered was bad but didn't dare ask why, so we need to use our hands and fingers to spread the dough out instead.

Italians are on a level of hospitality I was unfamiliar with before this trip, but I like it.

Gado nudges me, asking me to watch how professionally and effortlessly he kneads the fist-sized ball of dough on the flour-spattered counter top, shortly resulting in a thin circular sheet of dough ready for sauce. He motions for me to try again.

I try to mimic his graceful movements, pushing the dough out from the center while spinning the ball around and around the way he did. It doesn't stay where I want it to or stretch out quite like his did, instead reverting back into ball form the moment my hands move to another region of the dough.

He laughs.

I throw flour at him.

“Perché?” he demands in mock offense, trying to hide his grin by throwing his hands out to his sides, distracting a few of our friends from their jobs.

“Perché,” I answer sassily before adding my catch phrase of this trip in Italy thus far with the Italian gusto I've come to love. “Stiamo imparando! *I'm learning!*” I yell back. We hold eye contact just long enough to notice how quiet it is right as everyone else bursts out laughing before we join in ourselves.

“Motto bene! *Very good!*” Chiara shouts from her corner of the kitchen, taking the first pizza out of the oven.

I raise my eyebrows at Gado and stick my tongue out at him. Luckily, sassy gestures are things that simply need no translation.

Even though Gado and I can only verbally communicate in a hodge-podge of elementary level ‘Italenglish,’ we're still able to tease each other the way friends do around the world in hundreds of different languages. Something that makes me feel right at home.

“Buon appetito,” Chiara says after all the pizzas are made and all the wine glasses filled. We raise our glasses sitting around the dinner table, happy and hungry. Eating dinner all together as a family is something I haven't done in a long time outside of Christmas and Thanksgiving.

My family and I just never felt the need to unless it was a holiday or special occasion. I feel like we should be celebrating something much more important than a normal Tuesday night.

Even though this is nothing familiar to me, it feels more like home.

“Buon appetito,” we all repeat before clicking our glasses together, then on the table.

Rome, Italy, Late January 2019

I'd always dreamed of going to Rome. To see the Colosseum, stand on the Spanish Steps, throw a coin in the Trevi Fountain. I learned why all of those things on my list were important later in life, after I'd already decided they were very important long before. I decided these places were important things to see when I was much too young to understand the linguistics of traveling.

I was about five years old when *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* came out on Disney Channel and it was then that I decided I needed to go to Rome. Not only did Lizzie go on a school trip to Italy, but she falls in love with an Italian singer who shows her the real side of Rome. The local side while her classmates are being carted around from sight to sight in a bus. This romanticized account of traveling may or may not have been the start of my love for travel, but continuing to rewatch the movie so many times growing up definitely gave me a place to want to start once I did.

Seeing the special beauty of the more local destinations and activities made me want to see the real Rome. Even though at the time I had no idea what that was, the idea of not knowing and setting out to find something completely new and different was the most exciting draw to travel for me.

Luckily, I'm not the only one who felt that way and happened to be in Rome for the weekend at the same hostel as me.

Courtney and I met just a few hours ago at our hostel's free pasta dinner they hold nightly at the bar across the street from my room. We're both traveling solo so we were both up for making a friend to sit next to while we ate. Once we both started gushing about how good the freshly-squeezed orange juice was at the convenient store down the street and how we both booked a party hostel because it was cheap but didn't want to party, that's when we knew.

"Yeah, I think tomorrow I'll go walk around the city center and go to the Trevi Fountain to throw a coin in like *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*," Courtney says. I stop mid-chew, turn my head away from my bowl over to her, and look at her with wide eyes.

"Did you say..." I pause for a moment for dramatic effect. "*The Lizzie McGuire Movie*?" I ask, my tone awkwardly serious for such a topic.

I don't remember exactly what she says next, but the next thing we know we're scouring the internet for any way to stream the movie.

"We're *in* Rome," I say.

"We *have* to watch it," she finishes. We decide a nice night in is exactly what we both need at this point in our individual trips and a nice night in would be nothing without milk and cookies, and our deliciously fresh-squeezed orange juice of course.

How we both had the weird idea to combine milk and cookies with orange juice, we would never be able to figure out. Even after we leave Rome in a few days, Courtney and I will keep in touch and she will come to visit me months later in a different country.

Her bubbly, energetic personality, along with her laugh, is contagious. She reminds me of Brianna when she laughs. Like Brianna, you can't help but feel excited about something when

you're around Courtney. Like you're on the cusp of some spontaneous adventure, which we are, but we don't know this just yet. Brianna and I are fond of making no plans and seeing what happens, something Courtney and I fall into without a hitch.

In this moment, I can't even tell them apart.

"When in Rome," we both sarcastically say in unison. Whether it's the instant connection Courtney and I have, the nostalgia of one of my favorite childhood movies, or a twisted combination, there's a feeling I can't shake. The surreal feeling of not knowing how I can be thousands of miles away from anywhere even remotely familiar and a stranger I just meet can make me feel at home.

We don't know that we will change our individual travel plans to go to Naples and Pompeii together. We don't know we'll stumble upon the most famous pizza place in Naples to get out of the pouring rain and eat the best pizza of our lives in sopping wet socks. We don't know how hard it will be to say goodbye and go our separate ways after just a few days of knowing each other.

Athens, Greece, Early February 2019

I'm honestly surprised I've made it this far, looking out over Athens from the top of its ancient Acropolis. The sounds of the tourists taking their pictures and deciding what to see next have faded now that I've found a more secluded spot.

I swing one leg over the rock wall to the far right of all the frantic sightseeing, signifying to tourists that there is nothing left to see here. Keeping a leg on either side of the wall to avoid falling down into ancient ruins I saw on the long way up here, I turn my back on the tourist attractions and the tourists taking pictures of them behind me.

Instead I take in the view of Athens from above. The aesthetic of the modern white buildings and houses clustered together against the broken rock and stone of the ruins that have and probably will continue to outlive them. I slowly breathe in the fresh air as I try to sit still enough to let the sun warm my skin before I take a couple pictures to try to capture the moment. The bright, white city of Athens is undisturbed in its color palette except for small patches of rich green in between and green-gray mountains surrounding it all.

The way the Greek gods and goddesses I'd learned so much about as a kid must have seen it. The glorious city.

If only my elementary school-age self could see me now. Looking down on Athens, Greece feeling as capable and powerful as the Greek goddesses I read so much about. I used to run around at recess with my friends, each one of us pretending to be one Greek goddess or another. Whether I was Athena or Aphrodite, though I was almost always Athena, I always ran around feeling powerful.

Like I could do anything.

Traveling by myself this past month has given me the same feeling. I went into it at the beginning of the month completely unsure of anything other than getting from one destination to the next. Not knowing what to expect, if I was going to be able to enjoy myself without someone to share the whole journey with, if I would feel homesick.

But I wasn't alone. Not really.

I still had people to hang out with every step of the way. But passing the time isn't what made it feel less lonely, it was the security I felt knowing that there were people that would claim me where I was going. Carsten took care of me when I was sick. Chiara picked me up from the airport in Italy. Courtney changed her plans to travel with me.

Someone was always there for me wherever I went.

Looking out over the city of Athens, it's hard to believe I started my solo travels only a few weeks ago feeling lonely on the streets of Galway. Since then I've gotten sick in Germany, learned how to make pizza from an Italian pizza expert, and watched *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* in its setting of Rome the way Disney intended it. Even though I was so far from the home where I grew up, as well as the city and country my family and friends are in, I haven't felt alone or homesick this whole time.

With every friend I've met up with or made along the way I've made my own home with them. Our own senses of security with each other knowing that no matter what happens we claim each other. Home isn't a physical place, nor is it only one. It changes and grows with every person you become friends with. After that where you met becomes your home, where they live becomes your home, they become your home.

Home is that security you get in knowing someone somewhere will claim you.

They will take care of you. They will be there to teach you something new. They will want to spend time with you and explore new things together.

I swing my leg back over the rock wall to see a family try to figure out the timer on their dad's camera. The exasperated dad kicks the ground a bit as the rest of his family finally asks one of the many passersby if they mind taking a picture. Their actions look so natural and almost-rehearsed, like they'd been through the same dynamic before. I imagine they might have thought things would be different on this family trip. New place, new scenery.

I almost want to break it to them.

Instead I turn back towards the city, not wanting to insert myself into someone else's family drama. I scan my eyes over the green-gray mountains engulfing the city, sitting just still enough to let the sun warm my skin before I make my descent.

Epilogue: Lucky Lisbon

Lisbon, Portugal, Spring 2020

On Wednesday, March 4th 2020, I boarded a plane, Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer in tow, bound for Spain and Portugal to visit friends I made while studying abroad in Greece. I agonized for over a week about whether or not to go at all. COVID-19 had already had China quarantining itself from the rest of the world for the past two months while reports were just beginning to come out about cases from Northern Italy spreading down the country.

After spending an undisturbed week with my friend in Madrid, with nothing unusual, other than my adjustment to the late dinner time, I flew to Lisbon. I didn't know at the time, but my visit to the Lisbon airport that day would be one of many over the next unpredictable week.

My original plan was to spend only two nights in Lisbon before staying with friends in Porto, going to Madrid to say goodbye to my friend, and flying back to the United States in time for a Thursday morning class. Now, here I am a week after leaving Madrid at the Lisbon Airport for the fifth time this week maybe, hopefully getting on a flight back home.

Martin and I, a friend I made at my hostel this week, got up early this morning, since our flights are both before eleven. We knew we needed to get to the airport with hours to spare with the airport's new policy about how many people are allowed inside to help enforce social distancing. I only met Martin a few days ago, along with the other friends from my hostel that I leaned on during this last uncertain week, but this last goodbye is uncharacteristically difficult. Not the same kind of difficulty I've had in the past saying goodbye to friends from abroad because this isn't just an issue of missing someone. It's an issue of missing the only sense of security you've had for the past long and stressful week to go into a completely uncertain, scary situation in the place you're supposed to feel the safest.

He and I both know we will quite possibly never see each other again, just as I knew with every friend I've said goodbye to over the past couple days as we were each slowly able to secure flights home. It felt like a weird combination of a lottery you didn't know you were entered in and being the last kids picked to play kickball. I was, of course, happy for all my new friends that got home safely, but then that meant one less friend here. Each time someone else got home I got the feeling that our little group's luck would surely run out soon, quite possibly ending with me. Then I would be the last kid picked to play kickball, except the teams would already be even and I'd be out of luck.

Martin's red sweater is hanging just low enough for me to see the top of his favorite yellow horse shirt peak out at my eye level. He's been wearing it every day since I met him, telling all of us how much he loved the horses on it needing to get it from the thrift shop around the corner from the hostel. The thrift shop, along with most stores in Lisbon, were closed by the time we met so he couldn't show it to me.

It felt almost overnight that the rest of the shops and bars in the city followed suit. By the time we went out for our last exploration of the city yesterday, only grocery stores remained. After a week of coming to terms with the possibility that Lisbon could be my temporary home for a while until this blew over or didn't, it felt like I knew the city already. No longer a tourist destination, but my safe heaven amidst this ever-evolving invisible crisis. I've always longed to find a home outside of the United States. I've been lucky enough to find a couple in Ireland and Greece but I've always felt perturbed when the time came to leave, always longing to go back the second after I'd left. Now mid-search for yet another global home I find one, but for the first time making the United States my home I want to go back to. It feels a little too ironic to be nonfiction, but as the French say, *c'est la vie*. After rounding up the last few of us left in the

hostel and the cheapest bottle of wine we could find we found solace in each other's company one last time as we all silently sat in the empty botanical gardens mentally preparing ourselves to expect the unexpected tomorrow.

We found mutual comfort in this uncertain situation to which our individual stories lined up all too well through self-deprecating humor and wine. There was a sense of community in the gardens, knowing we might be trying to go different places but we were all feeling the same restlessness and disquiet. Everyone else in the world was distancing themselves from everyone else in the world while we were getting closer before we would be forced to follow suit.

Living in the hostel, spending so much time together squished on top of one another on the couch or at the dinner table because there weren't enough seats, we kept saying if one of us had it we all already did too. It was too late at this point. So we took advantage of it.

We became the only people in the world that we could get close to. The only people in the world that we could touch, hug, kiss. The only people with whom we could dance.

You can argue the severity of this virus all you want—and we have numerous times—but regardless of its mortality rate or most at-risk population, we all knew without having to say it. We couldn't bear the thought that we would be the reason for getting someone we love sick. That's why we will self-quarantine and distance ourselves from the people we most need a hug from. So we, the textbook definition of misfits and unlikely strangers that would have made a kickass team for the zombie apocalypse, held each other closer.

We sat closer together on the couch, we put our arms around each other on the beach, and around the dinner table. We hugged a little harder and a little longer. We squeezed every last drop of reassurance, safety, and love that we could out of those moments to try to last us through what comes next whether we're conscious of it or not. We'll use those memories as a source of

strength in the tough times when we're scared about what's going on in the outside world and our families will only look at us lovingly six feet away or over FaceTime, hoping it's enough.

But it's not, and we know it won't be. Maybe our family and friends know this or maybe they don't, but we do.

I pull Martin in for a hug just a little tighter than I normally would. I try to remember how it feels to have his body so close to mine. My last hug. My last touch. My last reassurance that everything is okay. I hope that I've been as comforting to him as he has been to me.

"You know we're probably never going to see each other again," he muffles into my shoulder with his native Dutch accent, hoping his bluntness will make us less sad as it has so many times in the past few days. I choke on a laugh to attempt it, but we keep hugging, knowing he's probably right. We know nothing about the future.

We don't know whether we will see each other in a few months or a few years because we don't even know what will happen next week or tomorrow for that matter.

I haven't even thought about tomorrow.

I've just thought about getting home since the border closures and travel bans began a week ago. So many people's plans and lives changed all around the world signifying that this was no longer just the issue of a few countries, but an issue that would affect all of us.

Tragedies are incomparable to one another, but I wonder if people will remember where they were when their country realized this was a global pandemic. When life as they knew it began to change in the same way people remember where they were on 9/11.

Most of us at the hostel and everyone around the world at our age don't really remember 9/11. We were still too young to know what was happening then or be able to remember it now. But this time we are old enough.

We're adults who have never been impacted by a global crisis like this. Something we've never seen or been prepared for. We have to make decisions that could potentially be life or death not only for ourselves but for our friends and family. For even our countries, our homes.

This weighed on all of us if we talked about it too much. It was getting so bad that the hostel staff started making a rule that we couldn't talk about it during group dinners in an attempt to lift our spirits and allow us to enjoy the bit of holiday we had left. After my plans had changed more than six times in the span of 48 hours, I couldn't think of anything else. I couldn't breathe. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. This coinciding with the symptoms of the very virus to cause all this anxiety didn't help and made me spiral with terrible thoughts all day.

Not getting home. Getting sick. Dying so far from home.

The next day we swore off thinking about the outside world and the likelihood or unlikelihood of the future, at least for the day. We went with the hostel to a fairly remote beach about an hour outside of the city to try to pretend the outside world didn't exist. I turned off my phone and we thought of nothing but the Portuguese coastline, perfecting our French accents, and making each other laugh. We returned to the hostel exhausted from being in the sun and laughing all day. In that moment we were all we had. The weight of the world felt a little lighter that night with friends around to help carry it, using our incessant laughter to keep it just high enough off the ground so that it couldn't crush us.

It felt refreshing. We had been forgetting to laugh all too often.

Martin decided to take control of the music. Suddenly electronic music was pulsing through the hostel and Martin was singing, his arms moving around like he was in his own personal rave. This made the rest of us all bust out laughing before we were compelled to join him. As I picked myself up off the couch, I thought of how much Martin could make us laugh

and the oddly reassuring feeling it gave me. It was a different sense of security I thought only came from closeness.

Lisbon will always be the place that we all became friends and went through our first phase of a generation-defining global pandemic to which nothing else is certain.

It's streets provided us a place to cry tears of stress.

It's bars and beaches provided us with a place to forget the world.

Lisbon gave us a place to call home when we couldn't get there.

Our little group of stranded vagabonds made a home in a hostel in a country we'd each only been in for a week or less, where we knew no one but each other in the wake of an international crisis that none of us had experienced anything like before. Each of us with no more power over our situation than the next. Confused. Uncertain. Scared. But together, making Lisbon our home until we could get back to reality and figure out what happens next.

I have no idea what will happen when I touch down in the United States to be tested and quarantined or what will happen tomorrow or how I will pay my rent in a couple weeks now that, like so many others, my job is closed until further notice. All I can do is hope that back in our individual homes in our own countries and even on our own continents, we can be as lucky there as we have been at home with each other here.

Now as Martin and I look at each other with blank smiles outside the terminal one entrance to the Lisbon airport, I know all I can do is remember his hug and his touch along with all the others that I used to say goodbye.

I know I will need them for whatever comes next when I finally do get home.