AN UNOFFICIAL BACKPACKER’S GUIDE
TO BEING AWESOME ABROAD

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AN UNOFFICIAL BACKPACKER’S GUIDE
TO BEING AWESOME ABROAD

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Thesis

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INTRODUCTION
TO START

“To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”
— Oscar Wilde

Imagine living each day of your entire life doing everything the exact way you’d been brought up to do it—you’re born, maybe in a small town and your family doctor, the one who delivered you, also delivered both of your parents and the two children they had before you, and you walk to school every day, with your doctor’s kids, in fact, because you’re all friends, since you grew up together, and you walk everywhere, in fact, though it takes a while, and you only pass a few other homes every couple of miles because there’s more land where you are than there are families; and you rise every morning—early, at 5, to wake the farm: first with feed for the hens, and then to feed yourselves, so you head to the hens and gather the eggs for breakfast because that’s the way you start the day, every day, with the feed and with the hens and with the eggs. Or maybe you were born in a sprawling city, a metropolitan scene scape as your backdrop with short bursts of honked horns lulling you to sleep every evening in your apartment building on the 30th floor where you live with your dad (your mom’s no longer around) and it’s the two of you, every day, and your favorite Chinese take-out place, which is only down the street, along with the Kabob place and that bar named after that guy, but you only know
what it looks like from the outside, because you’re not yet twenty-one and you go, every week, to get take-out with your dad though you realized some years back you don’t really even like Bourbon Chicken, but you suffer through it because that’s just what’s for dinner on Monday, Wednesday, and every other Friday; Or maybe you’re in Massachusetts, and you’re hungry, so you send your kid to the store for some Wonder Bread and a Hungry Man and you never use the stove because your Ma never used the stove and your kid comes home and he got the wrong kind of whatever it is you wanted and you smack him, but not hard like your Daddy used to smack you but still you smack him on the back of the head because why the hell didn’t he do what you asked? So you fire up the microwave and heat yourself up some dinner and your other baby’s crying, but you just changed her dammit, and she’s crying again, already?

And then one day you realize that this life is all you’ve ever known. And maybe, you think, you could’ve done more.
CHAPTER I

ABY

“Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into instant flame by an encounter with another human being.”
— Albert Schweitzer

It was 2005. Drew and I had had a few cocktails—Captain and Coke—and thanks to the Duty Free shop at the airport, we’d done it fast and for cheap. Three drinks in and I was ready to show my best friend how we do things in my country. We’d been in Greece only about an hour before I began my march down to the beaches of Glyfada. The water was a mere 50 yards away; I could see it through my slippery eyes, could already taste that thick Mediterranean salt. This specific beach wasn’t the most stunning or secluded I’d seen—hotels and businesses boarded its edges; the traffic was distracting; a tram that ran what seemed like every ten or fifteen minutes, cutting through the neighborhood and the silence, stood directly between me and my destination. It would take some maneuvering, but I would get there.

Drew and I ambled through the bar of the Palace Hotel, where we were staying with about fifteen other students. We didn’t know them and I had no plans on changing that. This trip wasn’t about them, and I wasn’t interested in making friends. Drew and I had come together, like we’d talked about. We were there alone to explore and eat, drink and sleep. The rest of them were just static noise in the background of this vacation for two.

I had known Drew since elementary school. At 21, we had a long history. We went to high school together and now, college. He and I were the only two on this trip
from that party school down in southern Ohio, unlike the rest them, from up north, in Akron. We were proud of this. We were Bobcats, not Kangaroos. And maybe they outnumbered us here in Greece, but this was *my* homeland, and Drew was *my* homeboy. Furthermore, I was Greek; he was Italian. We were the only two who arrived in Greece already tanned—the Mediterranean was ours alone! We were young and beautiful and full of ourselves. This summer was about *us*. Nothing would change that.

I led Drew out the back door and past the pool; we crossed a street, hopped over the tracks and hit the sand. I was sweating; it was hot. But it wasn’t sticky heat—Greece isn’t muggy or humid, just hot. I looked back at Drew. He looked good in the heat. I picked up my pace. The sand was golden and reflected the red-hot glare of the sun. It cooled my feet as it nestled in between every toe with every step. The water was sparkling; it was out-of-a-movie blue, the kind of blue you see in films like “Summer Lovers” where the swimming is private and romantic and the deepest royal blue. I hurried towards it.

As soon as the water hit my ankles, I inhaled, fast and quick until my body got used to the cold. And then in one bold, very swift and determined lift of the arms, I ripped off my shirt, and my bathing suit top followed; bare-chested I ran into the lightly crashing waves, and screamed:

“If you don’t like this, get out of my country!”

Always buy your liquor from the Duty Free shops at the airport. No taxes means more fun for less.

***
Aby and I were in Belize when I was sure I was going to die. I was pretty sure she’d die, too. It was 2010. We were on a boat in the middle of the Great Blue Hole, off the eastern coast of this tiny Central American nation. I was sitting, watching Aby as she bent at the waist, heaving her upper torso over the ocean. The vomit wouldn’t stop. I managed to choke mine down, to keep from giving in to the temptation that was begging for it. But looking at Aby—keeled over with the remnants of our breakfast that morning projecting forward from her mouth and out into the spraying waves, only to seconds later splash back in her face, over and over and over—made this difficult.

She had on only a bathing suit—we all did—with a wet suit wrapped around her shoulders, for warmth.

Aby has a great body.

Her skin is fair, except for her arms, which get a little red in the sun.

She is thin, all over. Her shoulders bones and clavicle jet through her skin at certain angles, and sometimes you can see her spine. Someone asked me once if my friend Aby ate enough, hinting at some sort of disorder. I said they’d never seen her house an entire sleeve of Oreos in one sitting like I had, and no.

Aby’s stomach makes me wish I did more crunches. It’s tight, though Aby doesn’t regularly work out; she was just born with an unyielding, flat stomach. She is every doughy girl’s worst nightmare. Her diet helps, I think. She eats whole foods and grains (and Oreos), no meats or cheeses.

At 5’10”, Aby is long, and used to model.

I sat, watching. Her lengthy gazelle legs, the ones that had miraculously gained quite a bit of color on the trip by this point, appeared pallid and naked and cold. Her long,
auburn blonde hair looked lifeless as it sat, flat on her shoulders and clinging to her neck, dripping wet. It seemed as if she’d rather die than live another moment like this. I sat shivering, my hair soaked too, and matted to my tanned face; goose bumps all over my arms and legs, I looked and felt just the same.

We had signed up for this. A sun and fun filled day trip to one of the “top ten places to visit before you die.” The Blue Hole. We were meant to go snorkeling. No one said anything about a four-hour death trap, boat ride to the abysmal depths of hell. Looking back at Aby, I wanted to walk over there, put my arms around her, and comfort her. I wanted to hold her hair back like we’d done so many times, to warm her up or make her laugh, but I couldn’t. I literally couldn’t move.

I was sitting alone, across the boat from where she was with my eyes shut tight and my hands placed firmly, palm side down, against the bench I wouldn’t leave. Over and over again I’d grip, hoping that a miracle had occurred and something—anything—that I could hold onto had shown itself. There was nothing. Not a bar, not a rope, not even a chair leg or a flagpole or whatever else you might hope to find on a boat. *This* boat was made of one material. Plastic. Smooth and squeaky; weak and unsatisfying. There were no bells, whistles or dings. At the front of the boat was the steering wheel. Directly behind, there were two “benches” stemming from and lining either side of the boat. There were smooth and extended all the way to the floor. There was no gripping the bottom of this bench. There was no bottom. The benches went all the way to the back of the boat, a mere ten feet, if that. It was not a big boat.

We were stuck in the Caribbean Sea in the middle of an unforgiving rainstorm. Because the boat was so small and the waves were so big, so relentless, there was no
stopping. We had no choice but to speed along, to keep going until we’d reached calmer waters. There were no life jackets, was no shelter, no hope. With every passing moment came another thud! as the boat leapt into the air and came crashing down, hard onto the water’s surface. Every time it went up and then down, so did its passengers. And every time we did, I thought we’d end up in the water. We were victims of momentum—the ten of us who had chosen the wrong day trip. There were three beautiful Australian boys sitting across the boat from Aby and me. They were our age—around 24 and built like swimmers with heavy muscles. After hitting an especially rough patch on their end of the boat, the boys came hurdling towards us. On any other occasion this would have been a welcome advance, gladly. But not here in the middle of the Great Blue Hell Hole. Their hard bodies tumbled into our little ones. Along with them came a couple heavy coolers filled with our lunches, which smashed into our kneecaps. We wouldn’t see the bruises for a couple of days.

We were dazed, soaked, scared. I sat praying, trying in my head to be anything but present, to be anywhere but where we were.

***

“Maria, put your shirt back on.”

“What, you don’t like this?” I spout back.

“No, Maria, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that we don’t know these people, and you have to put your shirt back on.”

I was beyond gone from all the rum and the heat beating down on my head wasn’t helping.
“Are you saying you don’t like this?” I spoke slowly, so that Drew could linger over the meaning, as I motioned towards my exposed chest. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen it, and I wanted to remind him that he’d liked it before, so what was the problem now? Drew gave me a look and then glanced over his shoulder. I followed his eyes, which are beautiful. Some of the other students from that other school were heading down to the beach. In one fluid, rapid motion, Drew scooped me up into a towel, flung me over his shoulder and carried me back up the beach, over the tram, across the street, through the pool and the bar and up to his hotel room. From his shoulder to his arms, he cradled me into the bathroom so as not to bump my head on the doorframe. When we were inside, he placed my butt down on the counter, turned around and shut the door. When he faced me again I lost the towel and wrapped my legs around his waist. In what felt only like a moment, we made out, I threw up, then Drew carried me to bed.

I slept alone that night. On the first evening in the country I call my second home—filled with relatives, friends, my people—I went to bed alone, only to wake up the next morning to a knock at the door.

It was Aby.

I didn’t know it was Aby at the time, but I recognized her as the vaguely familiar girl on our trip that had any semblance of style. Her hair was a short chopped bob of bright red, with a few golden highlights floating about. Her skin was fair, and without a stitch of make-up. I thought, what kind of masochist doesn’t cover their zits? Her clothes were clean and unassuming; she was simple, and beautiful, and looked nothing like me.
Right out with it, Aby said she’d overheard me the day before mention that I loved Middle Eastern foods, in particular baba ganoush, and would I want to go find some with her?

Well, yeah.

Just ask. If you get a good feeling about someone, just walk on over there and ask them to hang out. Other travelers are usually looking for buddies, too.

***

For four hours, we were stuck there. Four very long, arduous hours stuck in the middle of the Caribbean, where every moment passing felt increasingly more like it would be our last.

And then: the sun.

There was no welcome sign, no grand entrance under which we emerged:

Welcome to The Blue Hole! You Made It, Finally!

But we knew when we got there. The rain just stopped. The ocean calmed. And the sun came out.

Our tour guides slowed the boat and opened those coolers. They had fresh, whole coconut, and taught us how to open them, drink their water and eat their fruit. I was worried that Aby might have been dehydrated from all the vomiting and the salt water she inevitably ingested. But there were bottles of water to go around. We ate until we were full and then it was time to swim.
As we were getting into the water, which had suddenly gone from the deepest, saddest blue to the brightest, most welcoming, Aby said: “thank you for coming to Belize with me.”

***

Go to The Blue Hole.
Check the weather first.

***

We spent the morning wandering, just the two of us. It was our first full day in Glyfada. Although I knew the country quite well, I didn’t know this city at all. Aby had already studied the tram system, and knew which line to take at what time in order to get downtown. Once there, I asked, in Greek, a shop owner where we could find the nearest grocery store. Aby told me she was a vegan. I told her I make the best bean salad.
We finally found some baba ganoush. We honestly could have just gone to a restaurant; Greeks serve baba ganoush, calling in *melitzana salata* (eggplant salad). But we had planned on having a balcony picnic upon our return to the Palace hotel, so we went with what we found: a can of the traditional Middle Eastern dip, some pita, a jar of garlic stuffed olives and a bottle of wine. We crammed the stuff into our bags—sling purses we both were carrying—and headed back to the place we’d call home for the next month and a half.

***

Since Greece, Aby and I have traveled to over a dozen countries together. We’ve ended up living less than fifty feet from one another, too. When we returned from Glyfada that summer, Aby made several trips to visit me, and Drew, while we were finishing up with school. He and I remained extremely close for a while, but as we grew older, our adult lives found us pulled in separate directions. All the while, for those four years, Aby made the trip to Athens (Ohio). And just like in Greece, I helped her make it a home away from home. Eventually, I made my way to Akron, for graduate school. It became Aby’s turn to show me the ropes. She spent all day helping me find my apartment, only to move here herself some months later, just across the hall and up one floor.

The other day, we sat in Aby’s room and talked about our lives, where they used to be and how they’ve ended up where they are today. I was in a sweatshirt on her bed, she was in front of a mirror, busy curling her hair, and said: “I love this. Doing my hair. I don’t do it for other people, I could give two shits, but I just love doing it. It relaxes me.” She grabbed a strand from the back and wrapped it around the steaming metal rod, then
looked at me through the mirror. “It’s funny how our roles reversed, huh?”

When I met Aby, she wore Converse, t-shirts and cut off jean shorts; her blemishes were visible and she never wore jewelry. I was the one who showed Aby how a little cover-up or powder could make your skin like porcelain. I let her borrow my earrings and showed her that anyone, even tall ladies, could rock a pair of heels. These days, Aby’s the one in heels, and I’m almost always barefoot. She’s gorgeous, like she was the day that I met her, though her hair is a little lighter, and her clothes have a little more grip.

Me, on the other hand, I used to wear fancy shoes every day, even to class. Everything I wore, in fact, or carried for that matter, always matched, and I got up hours before I needed to, just to “get ready.” Aby showed me how not to give a fuck. These days, I really don’t. You’re lucky if you find me with my hair brushed, much less matching from head to toe. I feel prettier in hats and hair wraps, in earth-toned corduroys and tank tops, than in dresses or in strappy sandals with a lift. But still, no bra. I’ve never worn bras.

Aby doesn’t wear bras, either. We still have that in common.

On humans, relating:

“You’ll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It’s a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn’t education. It’s history. It’s poetry.”

—Mr. Antolini in J.D. Salinger’s, “Catcher in the Rye”
CHAPTER III
BONNAROO

I was without option. It had to be done right, and right then and there; no way was I getting around this. Moving to my left, I attempted to dart beneath the crowd when I hit a figurative wall: two very thick trunks of legs clad in cargo pants and sandals. I looked up; he was a tall man with a beard and a smile reaching far out in front of him. Right. Since I couldn’t maneuver through that jungle I tried my other side then, wiggling through what little room I had to move in, searching for some passageway, some flicker of hope, of escape. I tried to go forward and smacked my nose into three dancing things, girls with bodies like slinkys, only inches from me; their cute elbows and braceletd wrists stroked my ribs and slapped me in the chest as they danced. More bodies bumped to my left and to my right and I began to sweat. It was hot, though the sun had set hours before. The air was sticky from that afternoon’s heat, and thick from all the pot smoke. I looked to the stage. We were close. The tech crew was setting up. Then suddenly, a familiar face and an uproar. Wayne Coyne—front man for the Flaming Lips—showed himself for just a second and the crowd erupted. I smiled and shouted, then struggled to turn towards Aby, my accomplice. She stood behind me, her hip digging into my side. We were running out of time. Aby’s head, which on a good day with good posture is several inches taller than mine, hung just over my shoulder as she leaned forward and looked me stark in the eyes.

Yes, they seemed to say.
I nodded and she nodded back. We wanted to be slinkys, too! But we had to take care of something and had to act fast. We knew we could, together. And once we did, we agreed that everything would be okay.

Aby smiled. *Dance on, young soldier*, her eyes whispered as she grabbed the folds of her skirt and prepared to take action.

***

Aby and I were spending the better half of a week like this: in a tent, on a 700-acre stretch in Manchester, Tennessee, with tens of thousands of sweaty, barefooted, of-the-elements extremists. Some were dressed expectantly, in paisley and smelled of patchouli. But those were the boring folk. The interesting ones were in sports bras and mesh shorts, because you didn’t expect that, or they were naked and painted like American flags. Or they were just naked. I saw fairies, too. Real ones. But it could have been the mushrooms I had eaten.

She remembers it like this:

“I had to retake Statistics because I’m terrible at math, which I’d like not to get out, because I’m a dietitian. When I was growing up I always thought I’d be an epidemiologist because of the movie *Outbreak*, but anyway, that’s not going to happen because I’m terrible at statistics, so whatever. There was this guy in my class, I don’t remember his name but I’m certain that he has one. Long hair, just like, in it to win it, just like, all about the moment. Just a goofball. I just had this idea to go to Bonnoroo out of nowhere. I just decided to go and this kid in my math class was like, ‘Oh yea, Bonnoroo, bleh.’ and I was like, ‘Do you think I could get a ride in your van?’
What happened was this:

We decided we’d go as a test. A pre-Europe trial run. We were 21, without a care. Why not Bonnoroo? I’d never really camped, wasn’t experienced sleeping in tents, so when she suggested it, I thought sure, yeah, okay. Four-day music fest in the middle of small town Tennessee to prepare for a backpacking adventure abroad? Yes, we concluded. This would do.

Aby and her friend Jayme G. with the blonde hair came to pick me up in Athens—where I was living at the time—in a huge conversion van. The boy from Statistics was driving; it was his van. They pulled onto Coss St. and stopped at The Pink House, which was my house. There are homes in Athens, Ohio that people know not by address but by name. The Pink House, The Stagger Inn, The Spacement. I’d heard once that my new house was somewhat of a legend; that even the postal service knew it by name, that you could address an envelope to "Pink House, Athens OH" and it’d get there. When my parents dropped me off, my mother said: “This place should be condemned.” There was a large hole in the middle of the living room floor and the muddled shag carpet was nothing to joke about. We didn’t have any furniture that year but the floor served its purpose and then some. Aby came to visit on special and regular occasions, often and knew Athens like it were her own home. She made it really easy being friends with her.

This particular summer, I had just finished my sophomore year at Ohio University and was spending the holiday in town with the townies, bartending in the evenings and bageling at a sandwich shop that stole my heart most afternoons. I picked up extra shifts in order to pay for my Bonnaroo ticket, worked all day slinging bagels and then going straight to the bar. It was my first full summer away from home and in my own place.
Every decision I made was mine to make. I didn't always know what to do with myself.

Aby, Jayme G. and Statistics were students in Akron, three hours north from where I was. I’d met Aby the previous summer while studying in Greece. When the three of them came to scoop me up, they arrived late in the evening. I came out of my room to greet them, offered them some Wheat Thins. We partied and slept, then woke and left. The boy from Statistics would drive. The rest of us would cram into the back of the van and get ready for the nine-hour trip to Tennessee.

Arriving was a feat in itself. All those cars—80,000 of them—had to file in through one road. And then, where to park? For us, this took hours. The highway into town was backed up for miles. We sat, idly trying to pass the hours as heat dripped in through windows, rolled down as far as they could go. The glare from the sun reflected off the dashboard and into my eyes for a moment as I looked at Jayme G., who was in jean shorts. I watched as she tried to move but couldn’t; her thighs were stuck to the seat. Using both hands as leverage, she lifted and repositioned each leg slowly. Once unstuck, she placed them back down and again winced at the heat radiating from beneath her. The sun was searing in Tennessee.

Take a road trip whenever the opportunity presents itself.
Getting there is half the journey, or all of it.
I peered out the window. I saw only cars. Trunks packed full with gear: tents, grills, buckets of bottles of water and pillows and blankets and coolers, all filled to the brim for the next four days. Everyone had the same look on their faces: EXCITED. Simple, clean, pure. Despite the wait and the heat, they were excited. For what, I didn’t know yet. But I was willing to bet they were right.

It was finally our turn. All we had to do was get through security and we were home free. Someone approached the window of our van, a young and energetic volunteer who told us to pull up and park over there. Three men from security took over from here. They made us get out of the car. I immediately ran to one of the fifteen port-o-potties sitting side by side, lining the driveway. I wasn’t trying to hide anything, I just really had to poop. This in itself was tricky, but I was ready. Handling your business in a plastic box with people milling around outside it is bad enough during the daylight, but imagine doing it at night. Later that evening, I had the pleasure: picture penetrating a pitch-black Porto potty, having no idea what you’re about to embark on. You’re in, and you can’t quite see the door or how to lock it, the toilet (or how much stuff is already in it), the toilet paper (there is none), or the sanitizer spout (it’s empty, anyway). You can’t see at all but oh, can you smell. Rice, refried beans and tofu tacos. Hot dogs, three days later. The sour stench of piss that permeates through the stagnate air of this shit-box you’ve found yourself in, with no other option. You go. You wipe. You sanitize. You’re in and out, because you’re resilient. And because you brought your own supplies, tucked deep into the pockets of your cargo pants.
When I came back out, I smiled at the ease with which I accomplished my first festival feat. I was wearing a skirt, too, which made things easier. A few people glanced my way as I exited and I felt good about it, confident. I looked over to Aby and Jayme. They were digging their toes around in the dirt, waiting for our security check to finish up. Statistics was busy, defending his position to the festival muscle at the checkpoint. Security is there to make sure no one brings anything dangerous inside that might compromise someone else’s good time, and these folks didn’t mess around. I once watched a man doing Security at a festival smoke an entire cigarette without ever using his hands as he checked under seat cushions and between tires threads, before pulling a hatchet he’d found from beneath the backseat, passenger side carpeting. It turns out Statistics had some tools in his van that he did or did not forget were in there. He thought he could convince the Bonnaroo security team to keep his stuff. He did not win this battle. (They took his hammers and his ratchets.)

Do a thorough scan of your vehicle before you head to any festival. Just because you forget it’s in there, doesn’t mean they won’t take it from you. I’ve worked front gate at such events: we will take your homemade spicy mustard, your jams, your guns and your hatchets. Anything glass is out; your imported beers aren’t safe. Put everything you can into something plastic, or soft. No weapons. Hide your drugs, but they may find and take those too.

I don’t care if you’re going to India or to the mall: always bring toilet paper and hand sanitizer. For more space, pull the cardboard out of the T.P. roll and smoosh it down flat. It still works just the same.
And then in a moment: we were in. I felt like we'd stepped through the closet into Gnarnia (Yes, Gnarnia—another music festival in Beech Mountain, North Carolina, because it’s so gnarley…)

I had never seen so many things. Wonderfully attractive people all with this style. They were on stilts and in hoops, wearing wings and wigs, tube tops and hair wraps. They were in flannel pants and short jean shorts, in red sundresses and neon green sandals. There weren’t any bands playing yet, but I could hear a few guitarists riffing around, and there was definitely a drum circle nearby. I’d lived in Athens for a few years now and on warm summer afternoons, the trustafarians there would get out their bongos and sit on College Green, the beautifully grassy area behind the front gates of the university. I knew well the sounds of this scene because sometimes, I was one of them. A lot of my friends were what some might refer to as hippie dippie, with their dreadlocks and drug rugs. But they were good people. I found comfort in the sounds of these drums that afternoon and so far, Bonnaroo reminded me of the kind souls I knew back home.

There were vendors, too, unloading trucks filled with food—berries for fresh fruit smoothies and veggies for breakfast burritos. I couldn’t wait to eat. Artists were setting up, getting ready to paint, blow glass, build teepees, make jewelry. People were all over and everyone seemed to have a purpose, knew exactly what they were doing and looked comfortable and relaxed at it. It was a jumble of body, sound, movement, madness.

We were still in the van. Hurriedly, we moved along, eager to park, set up camp, and move out.
There are several stages at Bonnaroo, as it turns out—Which Stage, What Stage, This Tent, That Tent, The Other Tent. Imagine telling your friend to meet you for the Radiohead show.

*Which Stage?*

*That Tent.*

*This Tent?* (Points to “That Tent”)

*No, This Tent.* (Points to “This Tent”)

*Wait, What Stage?*

*No.*

*What?*

*Which Stage?*

*Wait...*
That afternoon we met up with three of my friends from OU by the big bobble heads in the center of that field. Virgil, Matt and Evan. They helped us have a lot of fun. We sat around with a box of wine playing ‘slap the bag.’ What it is: you take the bag of wine out of its box. Everyone stands around, in a circle. Someone slaps the bag, and then tosses it high in the air. When the bag falls, whomever is closest, will try to catch it. It’s harder than you might think to catch a flying bag of wine. One you get a handle on it, you hold the bag with one hand, at the top, and slap its liquid contents with everything in you. Then take a huge chug and slap it again, for good measure. Now it’s your turn to toss. And so on.

We spent most of our time, however, trying to pick and choose which shows we’d see and when. What a conundrum! This was the roughest part of the weekend: Do we see Hot Tuna or Ben Harper? Ziggy Marley or Regina Spektor? The White Stripes or Feist? And when can we fit in some time to snack or sleep or shower between the Police, Old Crow Medicine Show, Dr. Dog and Gov’t Mule? Basically we’re fucked, we told each other. But we had fun trying to figure it out anyway.
In the evening we found some mushrooms. It wasn’t hard. People with signs attached to their tents or written on their bare chests listing what they’re packing: weed, DMT, ecstasy, whatever. I tripped to Langhorne Slim with our friend Nick, and later to Rodrigo y Gabriella. I went to bed that night beside Aby, saw paisley spinning beneath my eyelids as I floated off, into sleep.

Day two: I woke in the morning without her beside me. Aby and Jayme G. had gone to get some ice for our cooler, I found out later. I thought about what to do with myself, decided I’d to eat a banana, say hello to our neighbors. They let me take their picture. I milled around for a bit.

I consulted my schedule. Pete Yorn, Wolfmother, The Decemberists, and The White Stripes were all playing at Which Stage one right after the other, filling the entire day. None of any of my friends were into that line-up, but I was, every part of it.
It was mid-afternoon when I strolled onto that field, alone. There were a few blankets scattered about, couples sitting snugly, and I spotted one small group of friends lumped together by a faraway fence. Pete Yorn hadn’t begun yet but I already knew I wanted to be close, knew that I knew all the words to his songs and I wanted to see his lips move as mine did. I tried very hard to look awesome behind my Ray Ban’s as I walked towards the stage. I felt like an idiot, but found and took a spot beside a group of three faces; they seemed friendly.

Pete Yorn soon stepped up and not a thing was on my mind other than musicforthemorningafter, his latest release. I could feel the crowd beside, in front, and behind me moving as I did. Our postures changed in unison when the beat picked up in “For Nancy (’Cos It Already Is)” and our voices lifted expectantly because we knew when they should in “Strange Condition.” I had a visceral connection to that music and in that moment with a thousand other people. It is an indescribable feeling.

People scattered when Pete descended the stage. I sat tight, confident in my day so far. I’d been alone all morning and felt like queen of the fucking world. It was right then that I saw him: tall, in a t-shirt and shorts, handsome. He looked a few years older than I was, maybe 25. There was nothing eccentric about this gentleman other than his eyes, which were a sweet, russet brown. They were looking intently towards me. He smiled. I waved shyly, and mouthed hello. He turned back to his friends and I tried yet again to look cool just sitting there. I grabbed a snack out of my bag.

SNACKS! Always pack them. You will get hungry, even when you think you won’t. And they are great for sharing, an excellent excuse to strike up a conversation.
(Would you like a pistachio, sir?)
I pulled out an apple. I felt more confident with a piece of fruit in hand; it gave me something to do with myself. It was then that Wolfmother began setting up. People were beginning to resurface, to crowd the stage. I stood and moved a little closer. Somehow we had gravitated toward one another, this fellow and I. He was right beside me. We’d end up spending the rest of the day together but I never did get his name. I spouted some generic comment about his t-shirt. He asked where I was from. We chatted. The other two in his group were a couple; he was along for the ride. Both of us were at our first festival, a little out of our element, maybe, but definitely making strides. We agreed: *Buy the ticket, take the ride.*

By the time the White Stripes had finished their set, my friend and I had left, grabbed water and food for the masses, then returned. We swayed to the Decemberists, his arm accidentally brushed against mine. I let it stay that way for a while. We danced, just a little bit, but enough. And towards the end of the set we lounged, my back leaning up against his side, our bodies serving as anchors for the other. He put his right arm around me. I could feel his fingers pulsing as he drummed a tune or two against my thigh.

When the show was over, we hugged goodbye. Not a name, not a number, just a hug and a smile and the knowledge that we’d made the others’ day.

Later in the evening, I met up with Aby and Jayme, Virgil, Matt, and Evan. We played at the Silent Disco: a quiet tent filled with headphones. We walked in; each grabbed a pair and danced to whatever song was pumping through our private, personal stereos.
Music festivals are spectacular things. Thousands of people, older and younger than you; nothing or just like you are all heading to the exact same place to do presumably the very same things—parents show up with their children attempting to give them a head start on their record collection and taste in good music; young couples arrive looking to enjoy each other in a new environment, hoping to spark some excitement.

There are those who do this on the regular: festies who hop from one to the next, collecting wristbands and memories of raging their faces off. Some fly solo; sleep in tents only large enough to house their own bodies, and meet their company as they go.

Everyone arrives with a different story. But the beauty is that under that Tennessee sky, beneath that tent and at the show—you all take part in the same thing, a union of spirit. And while you share that energy, that dance and that joint, you leave with a completely unique experience. Do the drugs or don’t, it doesn’t matter. See all of the shows, or none of them. Stay in your tent all day if you want, walk around, read a book, take a hike, eat a snack. Meet new people. For me, Bonnaroo was an independence I hadn’t ever felt, a confidence in knowing I could spend a day alone and be okay. It also taught me something about my friend Aby, a reliance on someone I never knew I had.

***

Aby and I had been staking a spot at the Which Stage for hours, hours just for the Flaming Lips—I hadn’t seen them yet and we wanted to be close enough to catch the laser pointers they famously pitch off stage and into the hands of breathless fans; for that moment I’d heard about, when crazy Wayne shouts at the crowd: EVERYBODY POINT! and we aim with our best focus for that spot on the screen above his head; thousands of glaring red, laser beams forming straight lines over the stage, creating a blanket to cover
our beaming faces from all the confetti, also rampant and whirling like the thousands of bodies below. I'd heard about this. There was no way I was missing this, there was no way. We'd been waiting, it had been at least six hours we'd been sitting, and waiting; waiting, and ready. But I had a problem and I'd narrowed it down to this: Either I change my tampon where I am, sardined between 30,000 people, or I can bleed crimson down my legs for the next two hours, where with every excited leap I tempt fate with the possibility at actually losing the tampon, it being so heavy and ready to roll on down my leg and under the stomping feet of everyone around. There was no escaping this, no sneaking off, no running to the restrooms I had mastered by this point, no being discreet. We were at a goddamn music festival and people were vultures at these things. Not a chance could I leave my place and actually hope to get back in. I practiced my adorable face for a moment, toying with the idea that I could charm a few thousand into letting me slide past them and back to my friends. I'm not that cute, though. There was no way anyone would let my into their coveted space, the spot they had been staking for eternity, just like Aby and I had been staking ours. I knew what I had to do.

Aby looked me in the eyes. They were her dance on, young soldier eyes. I’d seen them the summer before in Greece, but they had never meant as much as they did now. What they spoke to me on this evening was: I will literally do whatever I need to do for you, so let’s do this and then enjoy the show. With that she grabbed either side of her long, flowing skirt and raised her arms. She had made me a tent and was telling me to come on in. I crouched down, and nestled within its fabric, turning my body towards hers so only my back was exposed. My whole being felt exposed, I felt like everyone—including Wayne Coyne—was staring at me and knew what I was doing. I could feel the
crowd move around me, a few legs struck me as they danced. It was hard to keep my composure and my balance. Aby put her hand on my shoulder to let me know that it was okay. With that, I began to dig in my bag for the essentials: a tampon, some toilet paper and my sanitizer. I was ready to get down to business just before the overly zealous humanist in front of us made her help far too available.

An observer, someone who couldn’t keep well to themselves, was actually only trying to be helpful, but I really didn’t want her help, not in my delicate position.

She touched me on my back, trying to get my attention.

*Hey! You’re looking for something, huh? LET ME HELP YOU, HERE!* She whipped towards me, shining her flashlight directly in my face and at my vagina.

*No, seriously, SERIOUSLY. We’re fine, we don’t need that light, thank you.* Aby tried to smack it away, politely.

*Ohmygosh, no! Please let me help you, I don’t mind, really. Just let me give you a little light, you must need this, here, HERE!* She shined, again. Jesus Christ, lady.

*WE’RE FINE, THANK YOU!* Aby screamed, at which point she kind of elbowed this woman in a casual manner, making it seem like an accident, like she was just spastically dancing to the music.

With our festival martyr out of the way, I was ready to remove, reload, wrap, and sanitize in one very swift—and what I proudly consider seamless, innovative, and god damn impressive—motion.

We then watched the Lips in bliss. (We both got laser pointers, by the way.)
CHAPTER IV
WHAT TO PACK, AND OTHER STUFF

Maybe you’re wondering how Aby and I managed to prepare for nearly two months in Western Europe all by ourselves. Let me shed a little light on that, friend.

First, before you do anything else:

Buy a Eurail pass.
http://www.eurail.com/eurail-passes

This is, essentially, train hopping at a fixed rate. You are able to pick whatever package you like, for example one-country travel for 3-10 days, or unlimited countries for up to three months. You build your trip from there. The pass allows you to go from train to train without having to purchase tickets as you go. (However, we sometimes found a reservation needed to be made ahead of time for popular and overnight trips.) The Eurail pass provided Aby and me with flexibility, the chance to make up our minds as we went, and to take that impromptu trip to Salzburg from Munich. This was a gigantic, convenient, timesaving gift and I would never travel Europe any other way.

Once this is taken care of, the rest is really just detail. Here’s the thing: before you decide what to pack and what to pack it in, you’ve got to determine in some capacity what your general agenda will be. I say this only because some travelers will need specific things that others will not. Really, this boils down to: Will you be camping outside, or no? Will you be cooking on your own?
These questions are important because if you plan to be super hardcore about it—if you answered yes to the above questions—then you should think about packing tents, sleeping bags/mats, cooking gear, etc. Even if you aren’t planning on hiking through Sherwood Forest or climbing Everest, a lot of backpackers still choose to camp outside, cooking their food over open flames. In which case, there are a few things you might want to consider.

Look, I don’t know shit about camping. I’ve never spent longer than five days in a tent, which is actually a long time. But even so, I wouldn’t know where to begin instructing you on long-term tenting. I think the person who could better explain how to do this is travel writer Rolph Potts. He wrote to me and said this: “I usually just crash informally in a field or forest.” So there you have it, the words of an expert.

Aby and I chose to stay in hostels and budget hotels. We still felt pretty hard-core. We booked a room for ourselves in London and Paris—the first two cities we hit—from the States. It felt good then to know we’d have a concrete place to go. But after that, we were feeling more comfortable and took things as they came. Sometimes on our last day in a country we’d go to an Internet café and book a hostel for wherever we were going next. Other times we’d just end up getting there and walk around until we found something.

With this in mind, these are the things we packed:

For Function.
There are just some things we need to get by.
• **Backpack**—You absolutely do not need to spend a month’s paycheck on a backpack. The thing I carried in Europe was pathetic, but I made it. However since then, I’ve invested in a **Deuter Futura Pro 42** ($159) and I’ll never go back. Along with good shoes, having a good backpack will undoubtedly make your trip much more comfortable and functional. The one I bought is mid-sized and features a rain cover, several pockets to keep me organized, great back support and a ventilated pocket for wet clothes so they won’t mold. These people have thought of everything. Play around online: [The North Face, Deuter, Camelbak, Mountain Hardwear](http://www.sierratradingpost.com/lp2/backpack-guide/) among others, offer great backpacks. Or take a look at Sierra Trading Post’s article “Pick the Right Pack” to find one meant for you: [http://www.sierratradingpost.com/lp2/backpack-guide/](http://www.sierratradingpost.com/lp2/backpack-guide/)

• **Shoes**—Probably the most important thing you’ll have on this trip. If you’re going to splurge on any gear, make it be a good pair of outdoor walking shoes. (Go with something lightweight. Also, see below.)

• **Sandals**—your feet will sweat. Do everyone a favor and let them breathe once in a while in a nice pair of sandals. Flip-flops for anything other than showering is a mistake. That soft space between your big toe and the next one will undoubtedly suffer—trust me. Also, it is imperative you buy a sandal with a back, something that wraps around the heel. You will be walking more than you can imagine, so find a sandal that is made for walking. They will cost a little more but you won’t regret it. *(I highly recommend Keen or Merrell gear for footwear.)* Also: sandals are good to have if you’re going to “dress up.” They pair nicely with a sundress and can go with well with a tie or button-up.
• **Carabineers**—Those oblong clips that rock climbers use to get up cliffs, and others use as key rings. They are the BEST. When your bag gets full, your shoes won’t fit. You can loop the carabineer through your laces and let your shoes hang from the side of your bag.

• **A water bottle**—Aby and I carried a Nalgene with us and made sure it was always filled with water, or red wine. Nalgene’s are good because they come with a loop that, with a carabineer, will easily attach to your backpack, and hang there without spilling. Stay hydrated! Coffee doesn’t count.

• **Shirts**—pack your favorites. Solid colors are nice because you can easily flash up your outfit with an accessory and won’t look the same in every picture you take. Do NOT pack 17 t-shirts. Two or three staples will do. Wash them in the sink and rotate.

• **Clear Plastic Baggies**—if you choose to carry your luggage onto the plane with you, like Aby and I did, you will be asked to remove some items, including any liquids or toiletries. Guidelines require that these things are in a clear plastic baggie. It’s good to have these things around for that reason; they always let you stay organized (keep your dirty underwear separate from the clean ones; store your food/leftovers; keep your money/passport if it rains.) Some companies sell clear, reusable bags, which are more durable and environmental.

• **Underwear**—I don’t bother with it. Aby doesn’t either. Waste of space, if you ask us.
• **Poncho/Rain Gear**—It will rain. Pack something thin and lightweight, but large enough to pull over your backpack (unless you’ve purchased one with a built in rain cover.) You will look awesome.

• **Tupperware**—Aby and I treated ourselves to one or two restaurants per city; all other meals were collected from local markets or groceries and were mixed, seasoned or created in our Tupperware. Example: one cucumber, one tomato, one can of navy beans, one lemon. Cut and mix into Tupperware; eat with pita. Leftovers are already stored.

• **Toiletries**—you know what you need when it comes to the bathroom. Make sure what you bring (shampoo, lotion, face wash) is in a container which holds no more than three ounces, because you will be carrying it onto the place and that’s the rule. If you don’t choose to pack this stuff, just pick it up when you land.

• **Socks**—they might not look that cool but your heels will thank you.

• **Snacks!**—For Aby and me, packing snacks was imperative because of our dietary needs. You know yourself. If there’s something you know you need or crave, bring it. Consider taking things, like mints or gum or candies, that are from your state or the U.S. These things are great conversation starters and a good way to make friends—offer someone an American mint.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For Fun.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You won’t be sightseeing all day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bring some stuff to do when you aren’t doing other stuff.</td>
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• **Cards**—This is an obvious one. Poker, Euchre, Go Fish, War. All good things.
• **A sketchbook and pencils/charcoals**—Instead of relying on taking pictures, sometimes we made our own. Or, we asked our new friends to make them for us.

• **Books/Music**—there is nothing quite like associating a book or a song with a specific setting. Every time I think of Hunter S. Thompson’s “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” or hear “Lay, Lady, Lay” by Bob Dylan, I am taken back to a summer I spent in Greece. Pack a lightweight book for the plane ride if you’d like, but definitely pick one up while you travel! Bring an mp3 player for long rides on trains and down time.

• **Speakers**—We didn’t have them when we were in Europe together but almost every night we wished we did: when we were getting ready to go out, when we were entertaining guests, when we wanted to journal. Since our trip I have invested in an extremely cheap and lightweight, battery operated set of speakers. They do the trick and more. I would definitely recommend this. You might not think you’ll need it, but you’ll definitely appreciate having it.

• **A journal**—even if you hate writing, just jot down what you did that day. You might think you’ll remember every detail (it feels so vivid, so present at the time) but unfortunately, you won’t. A journal three years later will bring up some amazing memories and you’ll be thankful then that you kept record.

• **Photos from home**—they are lightweight, sentimental, and nice to show to the friends you’ve made.

• **Snacks!**—I realize this is the second time “snacks” made the list.
• **Accessories**—a few inexpensive items that will flash up your outfit, look cool in photos, make you feel special. Think: a necklace or two, a bracelet, hair wraps or a cool hat. Do not bring anything with significant sentimental value.

• **A Stamp**—I’m not talking about postal stamps, though those are a good idea too. Aby brought with her this stamp that she had received in some gift box sent to her from Yoko Ono that said “Imagine Peace.” It came with a pad of blue ink. We stuck that thing on everything.

![Stamp Image]

Some helpful links.

• [www.backpacker.com](http://www.backpacker.com)—a comprehensive site for all things backpacker.


• [http://www.campingeurope.com/guide.asp](http://www.campingeurope.com/guide.asp)—an interactive map that lets you pick a country or city and lists all the popular campgrounds, including video.

  Make sure you click on the link at the top of the site to have the website translated to English if necessary.

• [www.rolfpotts.com](http://www.rolfpotts.com)—travel writer extraordinaire.
CHAPTER V
LONDON

We said a thousand goodbyes to our parents. Aby and her mom rang the front doorbell to my parents’ brick home in North Canton, Ohio early that summer morning. I let them in with hugs and ushered them to the living room. My mom was there. She was kneeling, eager like a little kid and unflinchingly set on making sure the two of us had packed enough of the right things. We appeased her. Aby and I began pulling out everything we’d stuffed in our bags. It didn’t take long. All of our belongings were in tiny backpacks we used at school—not the travel-savvy gear you might expect, the ones from those adventure stores with the rain-covers that pull from secret pockets lining the bottom of the bags, with the air-flow friendly back support. I was using the backpack my mom bought me, probably at a discount, from the university she works at. It had one compartment big enough to fit a thin laptop, which is not very big, and another with some room for books. There was a tiny zipped-off section in the front and that was it. Aby’s was worse. Her JanSport pack was one large hole sealed loosely with one long zipper. That was it. We would be gone for over a month.

A couple t-shirts, some jeans, one pair of sandals, and tennis shoes on our feet; a roll of toilet paper, a few Cliff bars. We went through our stuff satisfied that we had hit the right note of necessity and minimalism, a delicate balance. Litsa and Kyle had other opinions.

“Why don’t you take a jacket, sweetie?” my mom asked.

“Girls, you should really take a jacket,” Aby’s mom added.
We shook our heads. They really didn’t get it.

“Oh! I have something for you.” My mom sprang into the kitchen and came back with a plastic baggie full of dried cherries. “Good for jet-lag.”

Aby’s mom was not to be beat. She handed us each our parting gift, a bright pink poncho. “It’s probably going to rain.”

My parents then drove us to the Cleveland airport in their minivan.

My dad loves his Chrysler because it boasts the Stow ‘n Go storage feature. This means you can literally lift up the floor, store your stuff below it, and then put the floor back down. Someone could actually steal my dad’s minivan and not even know about all the jewels hidden beneath the floorboards. (Not that there are jewels hidden beneath the floorboards, but if there were.)

“Maria,” my dad said in his thick accent, as we drove. “This van had everything we were looking for in a vehicle.”

My dad is an engineer. I looked at Aby and shrugged. My parents had been buying the same minivan for the 22 years that I’d known them. It seems growing up in Greece without any money has made my dad easy to please. My brother and I especially love Christmas shopping for him because he is just as happy with anything as he is with nothing.

My mom turned to face us from the passenger seat and added: “The Stow ‘n Go feature makes it very easy to haul large items, whether or not we have planned to in advance.”

Right. Forty-five minutes later we were at the airport. My mom would not stop kissing me good-bye. Aby either. She grabbed me tightly and we hugged longer than felt
natural, but I let it happen because I love her. My dad hugged me next. Not hard, like my 
mom. He wasn’t afraid he’d never see me again like she was. He was hugging me 
because he was glad to see me go. Because he knew I needed to leave, like he had when 
he was 17. He had left his birthplace, the island of Chios, because he wanted to 
experience what somewhere new could offer him that his own home, as much as he loved 
it, couldn’t. His hug that afternoon was a hug of understanding, a nod of approval.

We picked our backpacks up from the curb and swung them over our shoulders. 
As my parents pulled away in their Chrysler, I turned to Aby. She repositioned the weight 
of her pack and indicated she was ready. I led the way, through the sliding glass doors 
and into the airport. With confidence we headed toward check-in, ready for whatever 
would come next.

I wore my yoga pants that afternoon. They were olive green. They had no buttons, 
no seams, no zippers. I could roll my pant legs up when I needed to move with speed and 
roll them down when I got cold. Aby wore a t-shirt and jeans. Simple. Looking hot at the 
airport should be left to the Kardashians and the Kennedys. Aby and I were far too busy 
being diligent for that; we dressed for function and for comfort.

When traveling: 
Looking smart is looking sexy. 
Just looking sexy is stupid.

We found our airline and promptly did two things:

1. We did not check our bags.

DO NOT check your luggage, just don’t. It isn’t worth the 
risk. Keep your stuff with you and there’s no chance 
anything will happen to it.
2. We got all the specific details about our initial flight to Chicago, the transfer from there to Shannon, and finally the details for our last flight, Shannon to London:

- *What if they make us check our bags in Chicago for some reason—do we pick them up in Shannon, or will they go straight through to London?*
- *The ticket here says we arrive at 3 p.m. Does this account for the time difference?*
- *Where do we go through customs? Both Shannon and London, or just London?*

Look. Flying is hard, sometimes. If you have a layover, PLEASE just ask the attendant at check-in at the first airport all the questions you have, no need to feel silly. Always better to ask a dumb question than miss a flight because you didn’t.

We found our gate. With an hour to kill, Aby left me with our stuff and went to a nearby eatery, purchasing two bagels sandwiches: hummus, tomato and onion for us both while we waited for things to begin.

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Listen: the overhead compartment in most airplanes will fit a reasonably sized backpack. And if you’re backpacking, your bag shouldn’t be that big. Medium sized at most. You will probably have one of the larger carry-ons on the plane so first step is to immediately look for the largest empty overhead compartment, even if it isn’t near your seat. Beeline towards it. If you can’t find space for it, they will throw it beneath the plane. You will then have to wait around after the flight for the bag to be retrieved, which may cause you to run late to your next flight. Avoid this at all costs. Do not be afraid to gently push
someone’s luggage to one side in order to create more space for your own. Shove your stuff in there and then close the compartment door and go take your seat like it was nothing, because it was.

The two of us managed to do this without a problem. There was a young man seated in our row, closest to the aisle. He stood for us as I crawled towards the window. I saw Aby smile as she followed in after me. He was cute, I agreed.

The airplane felt cold. I grabbed one of the blankets lying on my seat, wrapped it around my legs like a towel, then pulled out my decrepit copy of Catcher in the Rye. The cover had fallen off by this point. I’d been reading the book for the last ten years. My mom never let my brother or me watch anything violent—even Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were forbidden for all the “fighting”—but she’d let us read any book. Those of interest to me at the time were any that had been banned from schools or libraries. When I was maybe ten or eleven, I picked up Catcher in the Rye because I’d heard J.D. Salinger used the word “fuck.” Sure enough, he used it a lot. I’ve been reading the same copy of this book ever since. There is something enigmatic about the journey of Holden Caulfield that changes every time I do.

Aby had her headphones in. I could hear Andrew Bird pumping “Imitosis”—a brilliant song to travel to. I pulled out some toilet paper because my allergies had been acting up that day. Nothing is more frustrating than needed to blow and having nowhere to put it all but your sleeve. I had really been getting into these Primal Sticks I found at the health food store in Canton—soy jerky. It exists. I got one out; it was “Hickory Smoked.” I pulled out my chap stick too, which was “Shea Butter with Cocoa.” There was a picture of a badger on the tube. I realized I had nowhere to put it, so I stuck it in the
pocket of Aby’s jeans and told her to deal with it. I got out my journal with the red velvet cover just as the plane began to lift.

Thirty minutes into the flight or so, I’d moved from reading to writing. Aby had too. We both promised ourselves we’d get down every detail of the trip, especially during travel time. A stewardess with dark hair pulled tightly into a bun at the nape of her neck came around with the drinks cart. She smiled sweetly and asked if she could get us anything, a complimentary soda or water?

“Yes,” I said. “I’d like a glass of merlot, please.”

Aby nodded and thought about this herself.

“Yes, I think I’d like that, too. Two please. Thank you.”

The stewardess smiled and asked to see our IDs. She smiled again as she took them from our hands, then handed them back and reached beneath the cart for two bottles and two glasses.

“Ma’am?” The young man seated beside Aby had spoken. He looked over at us, then towards the stewardess. “Make that three, would you?”

She smiled and reached for an extra glass.

The three of us toasted to our respective trips. It would turn out that Brandon—our seat buddy—was Irish, as his fair complexion would indicate. He said he was heading there, to Ireland, with his two younger brothers and their mother “for her 50th birthday,” he said, then turned and pointed. I followed his finger; the three of them were right across the aisle from us, back one row. His mother was pretty; her auburn hair barely brushed her shoulders. Brandon’s brothers were younger, probably in middle school. They were giggling. Their hands were actually covering their mouths, like schoolgirls, as they
fought to contain themselves. It seems the younger ones had never seen the older one
sandwiched between two girls before, getting drunk with two hot babes on an airplane
before. I laughed too and caught his mother in a chuckle; she smiled, happy her son had
found a little fun on such a long flight.

Brandon and I eventually made it to wine, round two. We called our bartender
back over to Aisle 14: seats A, B, and C. I ordered a second bottle because the first one
was only a glass full—they were tiny bottles. I was a pretty good drinker at this juncture
in my life. Playboy Magazine had ranked Ohio University as the number one party school
in the nation, after all. We Bobcats held a certain level of pride for this accolade. Aby did
not need another drink. One is usually all it takes.

By this point we were silly drunk. Aby and I began bragging about what good
hand massages we give. I explained how we have so many nerves in our palms and
especially our finger tips but that they just aren’t touched enough, that we ignore the two
body parts we use the most each day and something about reflexology and some other
stuff I probably made up about holistic healing and the powers of a good, clean physical
connection. Soon enough Brandon had both of his hands in either of our laps as we
showed him how therapeutic we were. I’m sure his brothers were reeling.

Aby turned towards me, wine in hand.

“To us.”

“To us,” I said and smiled, as we toasted discreetly to our trip, to making it after
so much talking about it, and to enjoying ourselves at every possible moment.

Seven and a half hours later, we landed. Aby and I said good-bye to Brandon. We
waved to his mom, and I winked at his younger brothers. They got a big hoot out of that.
I made a mental note of our first trip-friend, how easy it had been to connect with someone we barely knew. I have always been accomplished at making friends, but with Aby it is so much easier. We talk about it a lot, how well we play off one another. There’s no reason for it, we just have a casual and effective manner of banter, and our back-and-forth conversation skills are remarkable. If I start losing steam in the middle of a story, she picks things right up. And I always laugh at her pizza joke—which she told Brandon—which is terrible.

Make sure you and your travel buddy are on the same page when it comes to meeting new people. If you love it and they hate it, you will both be left disappointed.

Also:

Hey, do you want to hear the new pizza joke?
-Yes.
Nah, forget it. It’s too cheesy.

At the Shannon airport, neither of us was aware that there was need to rush. We were still gloating from the success of our first flight/friend, and so leisurely strolled over to our airline. We casually mentioned what flight we were on and were told immediately to RUN.

NOW!

Escorted by two extremely irritated Irish flight attendants, we sprinted from the concourse to the runway. Most everyone on the plane—it was a tiny plane—were glaring through their windows at us, hurling eminent rays of death from their eyes. So you’re the jerks who caused the holdup. I launched myself up the concourse ladder, thankful for my
tennis shoes and yoga pants, then tried to pull myself together before embarking down
the narrow aisle filled with angry eyes. As Aby led the way, I tucked a loose piece of hair
behind my right ear that had fallen out of place amidst the mad dash and tried to ready
myself for this walk of shame.

As it would turn out, Aby was seated on the opposite side of the plane from me. A
kind gentleman—though probably annoyed, but he didn’t show it—gladly stood for her,
and she slid right into place. I looked to the only empty seat left in the whole plane. It
was mine; a window seat. The woman sitting in my row, near the aisle, would have to
move for me. She would have to—God forbid—put her tray back up, undo her seatbelt,
and actually stand. For me. The idiot who caused the holdup. She made it very clear that I
was an imposition, and did not hide her distaste; from the constipated look on her face to
her audible grunts, she loathed my being, and probably her life. And these tasks, this
unfortunate 30-second shuffle I would demand of her as her seat partner, were without a
doubt far too intrusive for her to deal with at this moment.

She was not having it.

With my eyes to the ground, I mumbled an apologetic excuse me as I squeezed
past her. I cowered into my seat, curled up as tightly into the corner as I could, tried not
ever to let anything of mine brush anything of hers. We did not share armrests.

It was centuries before we arrived, though the flight was truly just under two
hours. I breathed audibly in relief at the slight turbulence of the plane as we descended to
land. Our arms never did touch, thank God, and only one pot of coffee had been spilled
the entire flight, onto the lap of the only lady sitting next to me. She was not as happy as I
was when we landed.
DAY ONE

It was too bright out. My first look at London was through squinted eyes. I considered grabbing my aviators out of my purse but thought better of it. Sometimes my sunglasses make me feel like I’m floating and I didn’t want to miss any of this.

There was a pale, wintry chill floating about, though the sun cut through the cold and kept us warm as we walked. Aby and I had taken the subway from the Heathrow Airport to what would be our new home for the next four days. We got off as close to Bayswater Street as we could and first discovered London on that walk to our hostel. Aby had gotten online and booked us two beds at the Royal Bayswater Hotel months before we’d left.

The streets were humming with familiar downtown sounds. I heard someone bump their car’s horn twice around the block to my left and shout something obscene. It sounded much more adorable in Great Britain than it did it Ohio, lighter and more delicate. To my right was the indistinguishable shuffle of fifteen or so Londoner’s heading to lunch, rushing to make it across the intersection and into the pub in time for that midday cocktail.

“I could sure use a cocktail,” Aby said.

I took a quick breath. The air cooled and refreshed my throat, it felt like the first day of fall, which is the best day. I felt something breeze past; one of several cherry-red double decker buses packing a busload of tourists towered passed us and hurried on down the road.

“What the hell?” Aby said. “Why are those things so big?”

“I don’t know, but I’m glad we’re doing this by foot.”
We turned a corner. It looked like restaurant row, which is my favorite type of row. The street was lined with eateries—I caught the definite scent of smoked meat as we made our way through the people swarming about. I don’t eat meat; neither does Aby. But at that point anything on the grill at least smelled good, whether or not I would actually put it into my mouth. Some Londoners had sandwiches in their hands. Others were in line, waiting to be served at a food cart serving shwarma. The majority of the people were seated, however, outside at one of several cafes. They were under umbrellas stemming from the middle of small round tables waiting for their menus and their waters, their small plates and starters. They were ready for lunch. I was ready too.

“Aby, I could eat a cow.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve seen you do it.”

In truth, no she hasn’t. But she has seen me eat a shit ton of tofu.

Aby and I soon found a bank. We needed some pounds if we were going to eat. Listen: the exchange rate varies from venue to venue. It will actually cost you more to exchange your money at certain locations than it will at others. Airports, populated areas, and bus and train stations know that you need money because if you’re at the station, most likely you’re traveling from someplace else.

Exchange a bit of money at a time. Shop for good rates. You don’t want to be stuck with 200 pounds on your way to Spain (they use euros). Also consider traveler’s cheques instead of cash. You can get them in the U.S. at your bank and they are no good stolen because YOU need to be there in order to use them.

It cost nearly double in dollars what it did in pounds that year. Our last day in London we would spend forty U.S. dollars on two six-inch subs from Subway. Yes, they offer yellow
corn at Subways in London, which they don’t do in the States, BUT they don’t have banana peppers, which is unheard of, so really that sub wasn’t worth forty dollars.

As we walked, we spotted a fruit stand at the corner of two busy roads, not something you see everyday where we’re from. We bought and shared the best banana.

A piece of fruit is a perfect snack when traveling.
It won’t weigh you down and it costs next to nothing.
Don’t waste all your time and your money in restaurants!

A row of businesses caught my attention as we meandered—an art gallery, a computer supply store, a clothing chain—side-by-side, long and tall, with narrow alleys between them. They weren’t stores I’d heard of before, not your Michael’s, your Radio Shack or your American Apparel, but built by small business owner most likely. Other buildings were attached to one another, row homes like in San Francisco, though made with what looked like ancient stone. A few had lofted apartments above them, with fire escapes and large bay windows. I spotted one cat, perched in one of those windows. It was grey. The general ambiance was like you’d expect in any big city. The difference however, was that London felt all-around fancy.

Aby and I took a corner. I wrapped a hand around the body of a nearby lamppost as an anchor, and used it to spin my body 45 degrees to the right. This lamppost was opulent. Its pole was textured with sleek, clean lines that jet out into perfectly round ovals in some places and quickly cut back inwards in others. These contours continued all the way up, creating an elaborate totem pole. The light bulbs themselves were caged in delicate glass boxes wearing lids that look like tiny top hats for gentlemen. All of this
detail lent nothing to actually providing light, but none of that really mattered. They were beautiful, both functional and aesthetic.

I thought about Ohio. When I was younger, every weekday at 7:15 a.m., I was forced against my will to go to middle school. Litsa would wake me up for a third time, and eventually I’d ready myself for the day, cursing its existence. I would then exit the house and trudge on down the road towards the end of the cul-de-sac, the concrete corner where I spent my childhood, playing kickball. Here, I waited for the school bus. The sky was dark this early, and so was the street. There was only one lamppost near my bus stop, and it never worked. The old telephone pole with the light bulb on top was set to an apathetic timer, one that only turned on when the sun’s light had already filtered through the air. At 7:15 a.m. I would tremble there, on the corner of Irondale and Marquardt, wishing terribly I were in bed still. And if not there, I thought—if I still had to be here, on this street corner shaded by the night—could there not be just one more lamppost?

In London, you can find them every ten feet or so. And they all seem to work.

There were far more bikers in this country than there were in ours, I’d noticed. I spotted one, an exquisite young lady in a red trench coat with shoes of the same shade, jeans and an olive green cap wrapped snug around her head. Her hair was long, and dirty blonde; it flowed like an angel’s hair. Her bike had a wire basket attached to the rear; there was a bag from the Gap in there.

“This is unreal,” I said to Aby. “Do you see that Gap bag? I bet she models for Gap. And under there is probably something else incredible, like a puppy or a first edition Oxford English Dictionary.” She agreed.

“These people are perfect. It’s disgusting and enchanting.”
I looked across the street and was intuitively drawn to a man dressed in traditional Greek dancing garb. I’d never seen a Greek dancer hanging around on street corners in Athens (Ohio). I grabbed Aby’s arm with elation, pointed to him and headed that way, ready to introduce myself. Maybe we were cousins.

“He’s not actually Greek, Maria!” she shouted after me, but I was too far-gone. As it would turn out, she was right. He was only dressed like that to promote the Greek restaurant he worked for, the dirty trickster.

The weather that afternoon called for a light sweater, so I pulled mine out of my purse. It was the only long-sleeved item I had, a knit, charcoal grey V-neck that I loved.

We walked some more. I looked over at Aby. She had that look on her face. I knew just the one. It was the exhilaration of being somewhere new.

We eventually arrived at The Royal Bayswater Hotel. It felt neither royal nor like a hotel. This was definitely a hostel, generally the lesser of the two. We approached the front desk and an older gentleman found our names in the book, crossed them off, and then showed us where to go. Our room was a bit sterile, basic bunk beds lined the walls and nothing more. We would have roommates, Aby noted as she pointed to the other beds in the room. We grabbed two for ourselves, in the corner, dropped our bags off and went to find the bathroom. Aby almost pummeled me over; trying to beat me to the stall we didn’t even know where to find. We approached the same gentleman; he directed us to the basement. The steps leading there were sunken-in beneath the fading carpet; the walls were milky-pink. We hit a long corridor at the bottom. The odor was noticeable, a thick, musty stench. It was dim and we were alone; there wasn’t a sound other than our own breathing and the pace of our steps, which quickened as the panic crept in. The first
toilet I tried didn’t work. The Royal Bayswater Hotel, a chilling mix of ding and mystery, and our new, temporary home. It definitely had character.

Aby and I soon collapsed onto our beds. It didn’t take long for either of us to fall asleep.

***

Bayswater Street was busy.

After our nap we refreshed up and headed out. There were signs telling us to look right and then left, a reminder to outsiders that cars come from the other side of the street here. I thought that was very courteous of London. We had no plans. Directly across the street we could see a park, so we went there.

Hyde Park has been around since 1536, when King Henry VIII set out on a horse in pursuit of deer on its turf, his private hunting arena. 1637 saw its open to the public under the rule of Charles I and Aby and I thank him. We crossed Bayswater Street and cut into the gardens, not through the majestic Grand Entrance made of Ionic columns and 100-foot arches, with bronzed wrought-iron gates; we entered through some shrubs and stumbled into what heaven must look like.

What an expansive space, Hyde Park! Well done! How classy and lovely and British it was. There were no swing sets or teeter-totters; this was no place for contrived playtime. Instead we immediately found the Diana Memorial, a fountain dedicated to the Princess of Wales and made to resemble her personal style. From an aerial perspective, this granite water-fixture looks like a necklace, and as the water is constantly moving, it seems to sparkle, like the Princess herself some say. There is ample room around the fountain to lounge in, run across. Aby and I took a seat. I immediately spotted a young
father in jeans and a suit jacket playing with his son, picking him up and dipping the boy’s head toward the rushing water. The little one shrieked with delight at the upside down perspective, at the thought that water might touch skin.

We kept moving. I spotted the Wellington Monument, a dedication to the first duke of Wellington. It is said that this statue of Achilles is made of enemy cannons captured sometime during the Napoleonic Wars. Achilles’ body—cast with the melted-down cannon—stands regal and nude, except for the cape draped over his bulging shoulders. He holds a sword in one hand and a shield in the other, gazing wildly out into the park atop two thick blocks of granite, reminding all of London of his triumph at the Trojan War.
Soon we came across not just monuments and statues, but quiet spaces for quiet moments; private alcoves housing a couple benches and shaded by many trees. This park became our new front yard, over 350 acres of verdant, extravagant greens splayed out across the center of the city and just for us. London parks are remarkable. You wouldn’t necessarily peg the capital of the United Kingdom as a destination spot for luxurious outdoor escapism, but we found it to be exactly that. We went every day. Hyde Park would come to feel more like home than the Royal Bayswater did.

Aby and I ambled on into Kensington Gardens, a neighboring park, separated only by the Serpentine River and Bridge, and an order by Queen Caroline in 1728 to do so. We found a willow tree to sit underneath. I dug into my purse and pulled out the evergreen sketchbook I had packed, along with some charcoal pencils. When I was younger my mom took my brother and me to art classes with her friend Diane. In the basement of their two story, black and white, sleek designed home I learned how to sketch. I was taught that a picture needs contrast and balance and that the darkest spot of a still life lies directly under the object, the shadow it sits upon. I studied blending with pencil stumps, but learned you could do it just as well with your fingers.

We were set on logging all the events of this trip. I was writing for a newspaper at the time in Ohio and used a brilliant voice recorder my mom had given me for interviews. I decided to bring the tiny device to Europe to capture…whatever. We had also both brought journals and planned to write in them, with fervor. As it would turn out, the sketchbook is what became the central element of our trip. It helped us make new friends as the ultimate icebreaker. It gave us stories, and perspective and an intimate look into some friends we are getting to know. It was something to do with nothing but time and
good company. And then, when Aby and I would inevitably have to part with some
people we became very close with, we could always turn to the sketchbook, a memorial
in its own right. But for now, we were in London and we didn’t know anyone yet. I
pulled out my pencils and began.

As I drew, Aby pulled out some pistachios and began licking her salted fingers. I
watched her struggle with one of the shells. The slit only hinted at the nut inside. It was
too thin for my liking; I would have given up, but Aby trooped on, trying to rip the shell
open with her teeth. I looked around. The grass was soft and cool. There was a family to
the left of us. Two young boys and a little girl of Asian descent were playing soccer.

Soon thereafter, this would happen: I would finish my sketch, a depiction of two
rows of trees—maybe they were London Planes, I don’t know—and then watch the boys
play soccer for a bit. Aby would successfully, eventually, get that pistachio shell open.
One of us, I can’t remember which, would then ask the boys if we could join them. They
would be so into this. We would so kick their butts, 5-3. Our pickup game would turn out
to be the highlight of our day, trumped only by our time spent playing with their little
sister.

Little sister was three, maybe. She had pigtails and cheeks so chubby I couldn’t
stand it. She was the cutest thing in Hyde Park, we were sure. She spoke with a tiny,
delicate voice in traditional British tone, about her stuffed toy monkey. You see, this
monkey’s paws had magnets in them, and this beautiful baby we were with would try to
stick her monkey to anything that would hold its grip.

“Where is my monkey?” she would ask, and Aby and I would squeal.
And then one of her brothers launched the soccer ball into the air, smacking his sister directly in the middle of her loveable, chubby-cheeked face.

She cried and cried. I scooped her up promptly and brought her to her mother. She calmed and eventually stopped crying. By this point it was getting dark, and we were getting hungry. We said good-bye to the boys and inevitably, broke one tiny three-year-old heart that evening. Our friend watched us walk way, tears streaming down her face.

We settled on Thai food in what appeared to be an Asian district; I spotted a market with kimchi and bok choy in its window. What’s so great about London is that we could have had Ethiopian sitting on the floor, or Irish food in a pub, or fish and chips if we ate fish, or McDonald’s if we ate fast food. Afterwards, I swung into a corner store, bought a pack of Davidoffe cigarettes. They were longer and thinner than your regular Marlboro’s and hit the throat more delicately I thought. You can’t find these cigarettes just anywhere; we’d discovered these gemstones in Greece the previous summer, had
smoked them with our friend Katy, who was a model. They reminded me of her that evening in London and gave me more confidence somehow, just having them.

After dinner, we walked around for hours digesting our food. We passed World Embassy Row; there were a few guards standing outside, so we hurried through. Around the block, we stumbled into a most opulent neighborhood filled ancient-looking homes housing wrought iron gates, pillars and manicured landscapes fit for Queen Elizabeth.

Aby needed to fix her shoe, so we found a curb to borrow for a moment. It was then that we saw them: two young men who looked as lost as we were. One was tall and lean, almost lanky but looked as though he’d soon grow into his body. He had a tightly shaved beard, and light brown hair cut short and close to his head. Moving down, I noted a well-fitting, black V-neck and dark jeans. He and Aby were wearing the same shoes—Converse All Stars, also black. I watched him lift a cigarette to his lips, take a slow drag and exhale with the seamless ease only a real smoker could master. This boy did not smoke socially; he was smoking that cigarette as if he were born smoking a cigarette. The one he was with was handsome too, softer. He had a honeyed smile and a baby-face. His cheeks were flushed like he’d just had a good run. There was a breadth to his torso, a thickness that made me think there was strength and body hidden beneath his baggie beige hoodie.

Aby gave me a look, to see if it was okay, and I nodded. She waved them over. They made their way and thus began the beginning of the evening.

We decided we’d all go walking together.

Aby had been bragging to me all day about how much French she knew.
I’m learning French, Maria. And, it’s awesome. Pretty much I am the best at speaking French, among other things.

Okay, Aby. Sure.

As it would turn out our new friends—Mattieu and Thibault, smoker and hoodie, respectively—were French. They were in the UK to learn English and to vacation, because in Europe, you don’t vacation in Hilton Head, South Carolina, or go on down to Florida, no. You spring break in Paris. You take a Roman holiday. You get a stamp in your passport. Our first conversation that evening was complete with broken English and extremely broken French no thanks to Aby’s expertise.

The four of us decided to head to Torque House, the hostel Matthieu and Thibault had booked. We had considered staying there ourselves but inevitably opted out because it cost more than we were looking to spend.

“So, you eh, you like it here in London then, eh?” Thibault asked us, pausing between every other word to make sure his subject-object-verbs were in order as English tends to require.

“Yeah, totally. What an amazing place.” I said. “It’s wild…it feels so modern here one second, like New York maybe. But a second later you’re standing in front of this…castle.”

“What about you?” Aby asked.

“We like it here very much,” Thibault said. “It’s very different from France.”

We would later find out he was right. Mattieu stayed mostly quiet, but nodded here and there. We made our way through side streets and slow turns around quiet corners as we walked in silence for a while. I thought about the United States. Why
people, like my dad, ending up going there and what they inevitably leave behind. Looking around, I thought about architecture in particular. The United States is a remarkable place, for sure. But her beauty is young. No matter how ornate, or expensive her buildings, the thing they just don’t have is age and experience the way so many structures do overseas. I thought about New York, about her skyscrapers, and about Las Vegas, all the money we pour into that artificial city. The Bellagio, for example. An extravagant edifice, the Bellagio cost an estimated 1.6 billion dollars. It houses thousands of dollars worth of Chihuly glasswork on the ceiling alone, but in the end, it is modeled after the European style architecture of a city in Italy. These buildings in London, I thought, these are the real things. This is what other stuff is made to look like.

Soon enough we arrived at Torque Place. A beautiful young woman with dreadlocks was playing the guitar on the front steps. We walked inside and into a mash-up of people playing cards, smoking cigarettes, everyone with an eccentric look and an accent. On our way down the hall to Mattieu and Thibault’s room, two girls said hello. One was wearing a floor-length skirt and a tank top, earth tones. Her necklace was long and beaded. She looked like I did in Athens, back home. The other was wearing bright colors, a bold short skirt and a tight black, long-sleeved shirt. They smiled. I was immediately begrudged by our decision not to stay there.

Look: Some hostels are “cooler” than others. They develop a buzz among backpackers that you’ll inevitably hear about as you travel. Don’t sweat over this; stay where it’s cheap and spend your money on cooler things, like falafel. Aby and I never stayed at the hip hostels—they are usually more expensive and don’t necessarily equate to more fun, only more noise. (We still had fun!)
We stayed at Torque House only a moment, however; just enough time to meet the rest of them.

Yes, there were more Frenchmen: Tim, Emelin, and Toni.

One after the other, each new gentlemen approached us, placed his hands gently on our shoulders and leaned in to the left and then to the right for two perfect kisses on either of our cheeks. It was delightful and so very French.

Tim came around first. He was pretty. He was more than pretty; he was perfect. His sweater zipped up at the neck and his hair looked better than mine did, polished and flawlessly in place. He had white teeth and a striking smile, and a lot of radiating energy.

The kid with the backpack was Emelin. He had glasses, floppy hair parted down the middle and an army jacket that was a little too long in the arms. He had the softest eyes of them all, and an all around gentle demeanor. He looked like the type of kid who carried a backpack filled with books and meant it.

And then there was Toni. Tony might have been an Armani model. He was tanned and unflawed. He had a faux hawk and a grin that could honestly kill. Aby squeezed my hand about this one.

We headed to Little Venice, the seven of us. We shuffled through the narrow hallways of Torque House, passing a few familiar faces on the way out, waving hello and good-bye again. Outside it was chilly, biting even. We put our sweaters on and walked closely together, Aby and I.

“We should have listened to our mothers about the coats,” she whispered. I put my arm in hers and looked around us. We had no idea how this had happened but we were an army now in London, the seven of us, and we’d managed this in only a day.
Emelin led the way to a spot, Toni told us, they had found earlier that week. Most of the restaurants in the area had closed by now, but we found a lofty area of grass under some trees and went there, the strange lot of us.

We made a circle, sat so we could face one another, and Tim got out the cards.

“Do you know eh, how play Texas Hold ‘Em?” Mattieu asked me.

I was sitting beside him, to the left. “Well, of course I do. Do you?”

“Yes, of course.” I tossed him my pack of Davidoffé cigarettes and a light. I had noticed that his had run out on our walk. Cigarette in hand, he bent towards me, slowly, and handed the cigarette back.

“You first.”

I put the cigarette to my lips. With his left hand, Mattieu cupped the end of the stick, nearly grazing my face with the razor edge of his hand. With his right, he flicked the lighter until he saw smoke. He then got one for himself.

I took a drag and looked across the way, towards Aby. She was sandwiched between Emelin and Toni, sitting up on her knees and grinning. It turns out Emelin did have books in his backpack. He got one out—a French English dictionary. With Toni and Emelin, again Aby tried to perfect her French.

There in the grass, we played Texas Hold ‘Em until it was time for bed.

That evening my friend Aby and I fell hopelessly, pathetically in love with the idea of it all.
DAY TWO

We woke. I felt like I had when I was 12, in a cabin at Camp Tippecanoe for the weekend with my mother and the rest of the greater Ohio Indian Maidens. That awkward morning silence and the sound of others shuffling, their trying not to wake you—you, the sane one who actually appreciates the value of a full night’s rest, who really doesn’t care about the early bird or the worm or whatever it is. The other campers—Sleeping Turtle, Storm Cloud, Big Chief Fuzzy Bear—would be pulling on their jeans, ready for breakfast up the big hill and then on to the scavenger hunt. I was Little Dancing Pony. This pony wasn’t ready to dance until at least noon.

That first morning in London, Aby moved in the darkness above me. She crawled down our bunk’s ladder slowly, one foot at a time. I figured I could sleep until she had at least finished brushing her teeth. I heard her dig around in her bag for a toothbrush and some paste, then exit the room as she made her way to the bath. I rolled over and shut my eyes, just a little longer.

I opened them again and realized I was the only one still in bed. Begrudgingly I got up, brushed my teeth too. We went downstairs to get the Bayswater Special we’d been hearing about. Complimentary breakfast for backpackers they’d told us. It turns out this VIP backpacker’s dream come true features dry white toast and hot water. I got some coffee and planned to eat some dried cherries back in our room.

London is extremely widespread. We knew we would be walking from one side of it to the other; that we wouldn’t be back to Bayswater until much later, so we planned ahead for it. After breakfast we changed and packed up for the next 12 hours. In one
backpack I threw a change of clothes for each of us, along with our toothbrushes, some make-up for touch-ups, one hair wrap and one necklace. Aby added two Cliff bars—both peanut butter—our sketchbook and our money. We planned to take turns carrying the bag so we wouldn’t have to suffer simultaneously. The rest of our stuff was just clothing. We hid it all under the covers of Aby’s top bunk and prayed no one with a desperate need for women’s jeans would find and take it.

We had plans to meet the boys at Pickadilly Circus in the early evening for drinks. Our walk there took nearly two hours. Nothing exciting happened. It felt good to walk though. When else in our lives is the only agenda for the day just to walk? We were getting hungry. We’d already stopped at a fruit stand, bought another banana. That wasn’t cutting it. We needed some protein. London was getting expensive. We had eaten out once at that Thai place and really weren’t planning on doing that a lot, once or maybe twice in every city and that was it. I had packed a Tupperware and we had planned on using it somehow, but hadn’t quite figured out how yet. We compromised with ourselves and went to a grocery store. Instead of dining in we bought from the refrigerated section a hummus plate and a piece of carrot lasagna. After our lunch on the steps of the first building we found, we carried on.

Even when you think it’s too far to walk, it isn’t.

Pickadilly Circus must be London’s equivalent to New York’s Time Square. Huge billboards and neon signs surround the infamous intersection, which convenes at the heart of five busy streets, each a mecca for shopping, entertainment, and social hour. The Circus has become a popular meeting place and attraction in its own right. We knew
right away we’d arrived because the energy level skyrocketed. Aby and I took a seat on
the steps of the Shaftesbury Memorial—a statue of Eros, the Greek god of Love—which
sits directly center of the five-way roundabout. This is where we were to meet our
Frenchmen.

Sitting there amidst all this movement made for optimal people watching. The
slight incline of the steps only helped, we had a good view. A man in droopy shorts and a
short-sleeved button up shirt was sloppily consuming a Big Mac with one hand; his
french-fries were probably still in the brown paper bag he was holding with the other. I
thought about french-fries. I noticed more of those two-tiered buses. Music was coming
from somewhere. I saw a billboard for Nescafe. *I thought they only drank that stuff in
Greece?* I was just taking note of the women and her two adorable children when Aby
tapped me on the shoulder and pointed.

It was a band, only a few at first—a couple guitarists and some music stands.
Suddenly, two dozen more people appeared. They were of Asian decent; all wore jeans
and a white t-shirt. The red letters splayed across their chests shined against the stark
white of their shirts, proclaiming to the world who they were: **Jump for Jesus** they read,
and they were, in every sense of the word, jumping for Him at Pickadilly Circus.

Their arms flew towards the sky.

I grabbed Aby’s face with both of my hands. “THIS IS SO AWESOME.”

Their knees bent at the caps as they sprang into action. Go! Yea! They danced, up
and down to the music, a synthesized up-tempo beat. It was quite catchy. They were
jump, jump, jumping for Jesus. Aby gawked in amazement. I was right there with her. It
wasn’t their beliefs that were strange. It was that we were at the busiest intersection in the
city and couldn’t believe we had stumbled here just in time for this epic, free show. *Was it a…miracle?* I wondered. They were jumping *so hard* for Jesus. It was like a flash mob without any of the choreography or coordination. But that was the beauty of it: there was no thought, just heart. These folks really meant it, and it was contagious, honestly. We applauded their enthusiasm, and got a free pen out of the ordeal, reminding us to jump for Him.

I looked at the clock and realized we were a bit early, shockingly. I thought about that guy with the Big Mac earlier and motioned across the street.

Something you can always count on abroad is a unique experience at popular international food chain establishments. I make it a point to go into every McDonalds I find in another country. Ever since I’d been in Greece and learned that they serve a McGyro (two hamburger patties in a pita with “traditional” tzatziki sauce), I’ve always wondered what other ridiculous concoctions exist out there. I know there are teams who do a lot of serious market research to find out what products will sell and where. In France, McDonald’s has a Grecian salad. In Rome, there is a counter that only serves pastries. We soon found that in London, they offer a spicy veggie burger, something unheard of in the States.

We squeezed our way inside, barely making it through the door with all those people. London was hungry that afternoon for burgers and fries. All we wanted to do was brush our teeth in their sink. We stood in line to buy a coffee so we could be official, paying customers.

The line for the restrooms was at least thirty minutes. I’d never been inside such a happening McDonald’s before. When a stall finally opened up, Aby and I both went in.
She put on that necklace we’d packed. I put on some deodorant and a different shirt. We emerged together, receiving a few looks from some of the women still in line. We got a few more looks as we brushed our teeth at the sink.

Public restrooms: they make great makeshift hotel rooms. Don’t be afraid to use them for all your needs, no shame. Just make sure to buy something first.

Ready, we found our way back across the street and to the steps, our meeting place. Not five minutes later, the men arrived. They brought with them: two more Frenchmen, Nicolas and Gael. As if the day could have gotten any better.

Nicolas, Mattieu, Tim and Gael. Pickadilly Circus.

There were nine of us now. Somehow in less than 48 hours Aby and I had acquired seven beautiful Frenchmen as friends who were taking us to the Dirty Martini for midday drinks in the middle of Pickadilly Circus, London. It is amazing the situations that present themselves when you let them.
Our friends ordered three bottles to begin. I went to the restroom, again—the coffee had settled in. I was washing my hands as a lovely lady in the mirror sighed.

“I hear ya,” I said.

“You too?” She said. She was British. “Long day over here.”

“I know what you mean.” I opened my bag, looking to touch up with a little powder.

“We’ve been walking since 9 this morning,” I said. I couldn’t find my powder, or any of my make-up for that matter, so dumped all the contents of the bag into the sink.

“My whole life is in this bag right now, and I can’t find a damn thing.”

I told her about our trip, how we were backpacking, about the friends we’d made out there, in the restaurant, about how tired my feet were already.

“Well it’s a wonderful thing you’re doing. Everyone should experience something like this. You’re both very lucky.” At that she smiled, and left.

When I emerged, nine glasses of French wine (of course they’d picked French wine) had been poured, and not a drop touched. They had waited for me.

Aby leaned over and whispered: “They insisted. They wouldn’t dream of taking a sip without you here to toast with.”

So we toasted, in every language we knew: Greek, English, French.

We proceeded to get sloshed, and then tried to explain what sloshed meant.

“You know? Shitfaced, wasted, schwasty, tanked, toasted, faded,” Aby said.

“Dunzo, goner, slippery, sloppy, plastered, blasted, black out, blitzed” I said. It sounded like my own troop of washed-out reindeer.

The seven of them stared at us. We ordered three more bottles.
I got to know both Gael and Nicolas. They were in a band together. Nicolas had lived in San Diego with his family; his father was stationed there with the military. He could easily have passed for an American; his French accent had faded and his English was perfect. He spoke the most of them all, probably because he was confident communicating with us; the language barrier held no bars. Nicolas looked me dead in the eyes when I spoke and listened like a priest would.

All the boys were lovely, really. But Gael, he got to my soul. He was truly beautiful, dark hair and brown eyes that penetrated my own; when he looked my way, I melted. I quite honestly got sweaty under the arms. Gael spoke carefully, as if making sure his words were right, as in, that they meant something. I would safely assume that Gael was the lyricist in their band; that he wrote the words first, and then wrote the melody to go with whatever he was trying to say.

It was time for a cigarette for all of us. Outside it was bright compared to the dimly lit Dirty Martini. I felt like we’d all just emerged from a midday movie; that strange sensation of stepping out of the theatre expecting it to be just as dark out there as it was inside, but it isn’t. Mattieu was feeding cigarettes to me but I couldn’t keep up. The previous night in Little Venice he’d run out and I’d supplied him with a couple of my Davidoffe’s. He was trying to return the favor, so before I’d even finished half of my first, he’d lit a second. I took it politely and smoked both at the same time, alternating hands and getting a head rush.

Aby was telling the boys about our walk to Pickadilly, how it took around two hours.

“What! Are you girls so crazy?” Toni asked. “Why did you not just take the bus?”
“How much did it cost?” Aby asked.

Someone told us: four pounds.

“What?! That’s like, eight American dollars. Sorry dudes, but I’d rather walk instead of spend eight dollars for one of those devil buses.”

The boys stared at us like we were crazy, which was becoming pretty common. I think they thought we must be poor. We actually were poor and $8 was not a luxury we had to just throw around on crazy things, like bus rides.

“We actually like walking,” I said.

They stared.

“What? I mean, we actually like walking, is that crazy?”

They nodded.

We discussed our plans for the rest of the evening. It was decided that we go back to Torque House and hang in the boy’s rooms. They were paired off and each had a room of their own, unlike Aby and I who were sharing with four others we unfortunately hadn’t had the chance to get to know yet. It came down to this: we take the bus—for eight American dollars—together, or Aby and I split from the boys and arrive two hours later.

It was a hard sell, but we caved.

“Those fucking French boys with their stupid beautiful faces,” Aby slurred as we made our way to the bus stopping, digging around in our bag for some money.

I changed into more comfortable pants as soon as we got to Torque House. Their room called for it—there was a queen-sized bed, a bathroom, a full kitchen area with cupboards, stove, table, chairs. I pulled my pants out of our bag and excused myself to the restroom. It was clearly time to get comfy. I showed Nicolas our sketchbook; he
pulled it gently from my hands, took the charcoal too. In a matter of moments there was my silhouette, on paper. He’d drawn my hair thrown up in a bun, as it was that night. The sweater and everything else were right too, as they should be. Aby got out the hummus and pita we bought, the boys retrieved the fried chicken they’d picked up at a nearby grocery. Gael got out his guitar. I got out my tape recorder and chronicled the rest of our night together; nine different voices—eight of us tone deaf—singing together to timeless classics, songs that know no geographical boundaries.

In our last moments together, I tried telling everyone a joke. I wanted it to end perfectly. I knew this joke; I told it masterfully and it always went over well.

The seven of them crowded around, forming a sort of half-circle with Aby beside me in the middle. Their eyes were upon me. I felt the pressure.

I began: “So, there’s this little boy right? And he’s riding his bike, you know? He’s just riding his bike down the street. It’s like, not a very busy street or anything, there are a couple of people around, on the other side of the street, but they aren’t bothering him or anything, so it doesn’t really matter that they’re there. So he’s minding his own business, right? And he’s just riding around, you know? And then—out of nowhere! There’s this cop right? And he’s on a horse.”

Several problems had presented themselves already by this point. The first problem was that not all of our friends were very great English speakers. This isn’t actually a problem on normal occasions; it hadn’t been up to this point. The problem was that our friends weren’t picking up on how hilarious I am. The boys were completely unaware that the joke itself was actually how ridiculous my telling of the joke was. They were trying too hard to understand it, literally.
Because of this, Thibault was translating, word for word, my English into French, for Toni and Matieu, who’s English was not as quick as the others. After every three words or so, I had to stop, and wait for them to finish.

“‘Hey there,’ said the cop. ‘Hey there, little fella. That’s a nice bike ya got there.’”

“Slow down, Maria” Aby said, trying not to laugh, just yet.

Thibault said something in French.

“And the kid’s like, ‘Thanks.’”

Thibault again.

“And then the cop, he’s like—
Thibault.

‘Yeah, but uh, you were ridin’ a little fast down that street over there, don’t you think?’”

Thibault again. And then me. And then him. And so on.

The other problem was that it is not a very good joke to begin with. The thing is, the joke I was telling isn’t really a joke, or funny. And even when I get to the punch line, it isn’t that great because there really isn’t a punch line, because I sort of made it up. My friend Leroy told me this joke once—about the boy riding his bike and then the cop who stops him, gives him a ticket. A year or so after I learned it, I tried telling it again to a group of people I’d had over when my parents were out of town. We were standing in the kitchen and I was pretty excited about this joke. I started telling it. It’s a long joke. Five minutes later or so, when I was done, and the punch line had inevitably failed, Leroy stopped me.
“That’s not the joke, Maria.”

“What?”

“That’s not the joke. I told you that joke, years ago. And that’s not it. You just made that joke up.”

I have always loved telling this joke precisely because it is so long-winded, exaggerated, and fictitious. But this, in London on our last night together, took things to a new level. All the while, Aby could not hold it in, could not handle how ludicrous this scene was, how the seven of them just did not understand this joke. She was chirping with laughter as I tried, so hard, with everything in me, to make the Frenchmen laugh too.

“So HE said, ‘The next time you get a horse for Christmas, make sure they put the dick on the bottom, where it belongs, instead of on top!’”

I’d delivered the punch line.

Aby was the only one laughing.

As we said our good-byes, Tim invited us to go camping with them in their native Marseilles, France. The boys, as it would turn out, were big campers. They had a camper, in fact—The Speedfreak. They would love to host us, he said, so long as we didn’t mind eating canned beans. We said we love beans.

| Making friends abroad is awesome.  
| Chances are they would love to come to the States.  
| Offer up your place and they’ll return the favor. |

**DAY THREE**

I threw on my baggy brown linen pants that morning. We started toward Central London for the two-hour walk to the Bridge, the one we all know in verse, the one that
that child’s song is sung after. There were cabs everywhere and we had to fight the urge to flag one.

“Walking is good for our hearts, yo!” Aby reminded me when I started physically dragging my Pumas along the sidewalk.

“Fuck this shit,” I said.

When it started raining an hour in, I actually had to swat Aby’s hand as she lifted it in hopes for a ride.

“Heart-health, you idiot,” I reminded her.

We reached the London Bridge and discovered it was well worth the walk. The structure itself is incredible, nearly 900 feet tall and 100 wide. I have always been in awe of bridges. Who builds these incredible things and how do they do it? I understand that there are support beams involved, that it’s a step by step process, but the undertaking is so massive, it’s hard to wrap my head around. I continued to awe at London Bridge, its vast expanse and enormity, its gothic, cathedral-reminiscent towers.

This modern bridge took over six years to complete, from 1967-1972. It was to replace the “old” London Bridge, which was demolished in 1831 after 600 years of use, and also the “new” London Bridge, which had been built to replace its predecessor in 1824. The present day London Bridge strikes a stunning balance of heritage and modernity. Its arch is made of concrete that fits well within the ancient architecture of the city, while the warm lights that lie beneath it illuminate the bridge with an element of youth and class. This bridge is as impressive in its history as it is in its function and beauty.
And the view from up there is remarkable. It overlooks all of London’s major players—the Tate, the Globe—and offers great perspective of Big Ben. Looking out from London Bridge is like looking at the city through a snow globe, everything as tiny as it is significant.

I loved most the view of Shakespeare’s Globe. As a certified member of the International Thespian Society (thank you very much) I’d studied this theatre for years in my drama class in high school. Our instructor, Ms. Derr—a brilliant woman—introduced me to the immense theatrical history London offers. She also wrote me passes out of Pre-Calc. if I brought her a Diet Coke and an egg bagel from Fisher’s Grocery. While this Globe was in fact a reconstruction of the one where Shakespeare had had so much influence, it was still pretty remarkable to look down upon.

We crossed the bridge and carried on. It was here we first saw them: the street performers. Aby and I would soon become well acquainted with this subculture, spotting them in nearly every city and eventually hitting it off with a couple jugglers while in Belgium. Here in London, a robot first caught my attention. The performing was painted entirely in silver metallic, and standing on a box. He was one of several tourist traps/attractions, a relative distinction, but I liked him. He looked and moved exactly how I imagine robots do it; the likeliness was remarkable. I stood beside him for a moment, doing my best robot impression just long enough so Aby could snap a picture.
We were wandering through Indian District when the rain started hammering down. It wasn’t a rain you could overlook. This was a rain you could not ignore. In only minutes it had penetrated every layer of our clothing. My bottoms of my pants were getting wet and nothing makes me crazier. The water was slowly working its way up through the fabric, was at my ankles and only moments later was to my calves. It was digging through our bag, aiming for our money, our passports. Of course we’d left our ponchos in the hostel.

Aby spotted a Starbucks.

We had to cross a busy street to get there, passing several Indian restaurants and groceries. Saffron, coriander, fenugreek, ginger root. The smell was wafting through the rain.

“When the rain lets up?” I pointed to a nearby restaurant. Aby nodded.

It seems everyone else on the street had the same idea as we did. We could hardly get inside the Starbuck’s door, but finally found a seat, by a bay window; we sat on its
ledge. All of us—the businesswomen and men, the families, the two friends in the corner and the couple sitting by the bathroom—were only inches from one another. It felt nice, to be in it all together. There is something humbling about a minor natural “disaster” like the rain was that day. It put us all on the same playing field, and in the same boat. Aby had to use the restroom.

“Here, take this.” I dug through our bag and handed her the toilet paper roll.

“Right, thanks,” she said.

I tried to compose myself. A man in a suit was sitting a few feet in front of me.

“Excuse me sir, do you know what day it is?”

“It’s the fourteenth, dear.”

“Great, thank you so much.” In a moment I realized that that wasn’t what I was asking. “Do you happen to know what day of the week it was?”

“Oh. Of course. It’s Thursday.”

It became quite obvious then that we stood out. Aby came back from the restroom and I took a look at the two of us, objectively. I had on my baggie hippie pants and a hair wrap. Aby, with our bulking backpack around her shoulders and a roll of toilet paper in her hands, looked down right down to business. We didn’t even know what day of the week it was, and when we ordered our two soy lattes, we paid completely in change, trying very hard to figure out which coins were what. It was clear we weren’t from around there, that we were visiting and living out of our bags, only a moment at a time.

The rain wasn’t letting up anytime soon, so we got out our journals. We wrote for a while, about the past two days, about our friends and how lucky we felt to have found them. We had only been out of the States for a few days now, but those were long and
full days, and it felt like we’d been gone for so much longer than we had. That’s the beauty of traveling. Every moment is unique and worth appreciating; none are taken for granted like so many are in our day-to-day lives.

The sun had come out. A few people here and there had begun the shuffle through the crowd and out the door. Some room opened up. I stretched my legs into the aisle and looked out the window. To my right, I felt someone’s touch. I turned—it was a young man. He had been sitting a few people over during our stay. He handed me a sheet of paper.

“Don’t read this until I leave,” he said.

I tried to catch him, to thank him and ask him who he was, what inspired him to write what he had, but he’d left. We read the note that night. It was a list of quotations encouraging us to keep doing what we were doing. At the end, he wished us well:

*Good luck exploring the infinite abyss.*

The note that Persaud left.
DAY FOUR

It was our last day in London and we had 15 hours to kill. I knew exactly how I needed to spend that day.

It was a picture I was after, the single shot that every tourist takes, like one you might find in a Nikon commercial, for example: a striking image of a middle-aged woman, both arms extended, outwards and up against the upper half of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Her palms seamlessly affixed to the contours of the structure. Snap! The photo taken, it appears as if this beautiful mother of three, on her 10 year wedding anniversary with her husband, an architect—so her took her to Italy for the assembly of it all—in her Dockers (knee-length) and melon-colored tank top with her fanny pack on and a little to the side, carrying, no doubt, her passport and her cash, with her light, rain-resistant jacket tied around the waist, successfully manages to seamlessly support the 14,500 metric tons of white marble, looking unblemished and carefree and remarkable all the while, and smiling bright, because that’s what traveling is really all about. Right? The money shot you can’t head home without.

Well, I wanted a fucking picture of me walking across Abbey Road like the goddamn Beatles did.

The problem: Aby HATES the Beatles.

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Checkout from the Royal Bayswater was early. We skipped breakfast altogether that morning—a tragic loss—in lieu of packing up our things and getting a start on the day. We had no plans, really. The boys had left, home to France and we had hit most of the things on our list. There was one, though…
We began back in Hyde Park. This time, we dug a little further into the landscape, found an entirely secluded field of tall grass. This was where we did a necessary assessment of our things.

We laid out our bright pink ponchos as blankets and turned our backpacks upside. Everything tumbled out, our clothes of course, some new snacks I’d picked up, a few pens we’d collected. Now was the time to reorganize. Because our bags didn’t have many pockets, our stuff was jumbled. It was hard to find things quickly. On days of intercontinental travel, we knew it was best to be organized.

We rolled our clothes back as they should be, separating those that were still clean and those that might need to be washed in the sink, next city.

Roll, never fold. It’ll save you so much room.

I put all of our remaining granola bars into the Tupperware so that they would maintain their structure. We consolidated lotions, got rid of extra bottles, wrappers, heavy pieces of lint…

“What is this, hm?” Aby looked real serious.

“A paper clip, I don’t know.”

“Every ounce counts, Varonis!”

Every ounce counts is right. We got rid of those pens too. It’s amazing how the little things add up and weigh down on our backs when we move for so long, carrying.

Before we left we gave one last nod to Hyde Park. I leapt up and sprinted as fast as I could for maybe 30 seconds. Then I waded through some tall grass because it felt good running across my thighs. Aby did some exploring of her own, at her own pace.
Our last day in Hyde Park.
When we had thoroughly exhausted ourselves, I went for it.

“Dude. Abbey Road?”

“Ugh, fine,” she said like it was the worst suggestion ever. “Whatever, you owe me.”

I smiled. That was that. And then, we began.

For nearly six straight hours we walked trying to find this road. We had all of our stuff on our backs, which we didn’t know then that we could have avoided.

Hotels and hostels usually have storage space for your stuff. If you have an early checkout and want to wander a bit, hands free, just ask the staff to accommodate. They will most likely do this at no cost or you may be able to rent a locker for cheap.

It was early afternoon. Foot traffic in London was heavy, like our first day in the city. People were cutting across street corners, hurrying to make it to whatever they had going on. All we had going on was trying to find this road that I’ve got on this vinyl back home.

Someone breezed past me, to my right.

“Excuse me sir?”

He was wearing a suit and looked about his business. Not in a hurry necessarily, so I didn’t think stopping him momentarily, to ask for directions, would be such an imposition.

“Abbey Road?” He scoured. “Hmph! Good. Luck.”

This man had the snootiest tone I may have ever heard. He looked me up and down; my Ray Bans were on, my hair was down and a mess.
“You’re NOT going to be able to walk it, you know? It is a busy street.”

He then half-heartedly pointed us in a direction that for some reason, we followed. An hour later we realized we were so off track, we had to wonder if he had done it on purpose.

“What a jerk,” Aby said, and I suddenly felt terrible making her take this trek with me, knowing it meant nothing to her.

Aby, however—her personal disposition aside—was right by my side. We spent the next four hours at it; trying to take a simple picture because we could. Because nowhere else in the world can you take this picture or see that notorious street. It was our day to do what we wanted, and Aby gave this one to me.

And then we got lost again. This time in Knightsbridge, a ritzy shopping district. We had no idea how we ended up there but almost every manicured head turned to stare at us from their luncheon booths. We turned a quick corner, down a side street lined with boutiques. I spotted a woman, the owner of a clothing store, leaning out her front door sipping on champagne in a flute and smoking a cigarette. She looked as if she were trying to look fabulous. To me, she looked tired and unhappy. We were definitely in the wrong neighborhood.

An hour later, there it was.

That guy was right; it was a busy street and we just sort of stumbled upon it. Abbey Road was not set aside for tourists alone. Citizens of London sped down the street on their way to work; out to dinner; to a co-worker’s birthday party. There was nothing obvious either about the legendary EMI Studios, where the Beatles recorded the album that inspired the photo; the one where the four of them—George, Paul, Ringo, John, from
left to right—cross the street in stride. The street, the infamous road we’d spent all day
scouring the city to find, was right in front of us.

I had to wait out two street lights to get into position. I could tell Aby was a little
uncomfortable with the scene, it being quite a touristy thing to do and so in the middle of
a busy intersection and all. I put her on photo duty. She stayed back as I made my across
one street, then wait for the light change, then over, caddy corner from her. I had to wait
for the light again. And then it was my turn, to walk across Abbey Road.

It really was worth it.

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A friend of mine living in Cleveland said something once that really stuck, something I
try to do whenever I’m feeling in a rut, which happens more than I’d like to admit. She
said if I ever get bored, start feeling stir-crazy and sick of everything—of my apartment,
of my city, of doing the same thing every night and running into the same assholes, to
just pretend that I am anywhere else, somewhere I’ve never been before.

Get dressed, she said, like you’ve got no one but strangers to impress. You’ll
lighten up. Trust me.

She did it once with a friend. They went to this hole in the wall bar that they
passed all the time but never thought twice about, not for a moment. When the two ladies
stepped inside, there were no awkward glances from any ex-lovers, no dipping into
corners to avoid that old friend. It was just the two of them and a bunch of people they
didn’t know. No one was there for them to look good for, no one to make sure they were
on their best behavior.

New places tend to bring out fewer inhibitions. We think, I’ll never see these
people again, so we let go. We do things we normally wouldn’t dream of doing. And we
have a lot more fun. This is why Aby and I love to travel. It reminds me that I’m still
breathing.
CHAPTER VI
BRUGES

Aby is not a heavy drinker. She loves whiskey but can’t take much of it because she weighs very few pounds; there’s nowhere for the alcohol to go, and nothing for it to hold onto. Though tall, Aby is little. She’s lean. Give her half a mixed drink and she’s hiccupping like a goof because she’s tipsy, already. And then, in true Aby-form, she’ll cover her mouth delicately with her right hand as she tries to hide her tiny baby burps. Always the lady. I’ll forever know exactly the moment when Aby hits this point because she gives the best hugs. After our first two beers in Belgium, this is about where she was. I was feeling pretty loaded, too. But I hide my liquor much better. Usually.

We were in Bruges, which is in Belgium. Aby and I found ourselves here after a misty afternoon train departure from Paris. It was raining. It started raining once we started moving and didn’t let up until long after we’d arrived. I was wearing my olive green yoga pants and a charcoal grey sweater over a moss green t-shirt that I got from this bar I used to work at in Athens. It depicts a cartoonish leprechaun drinking beer out of a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Aby wore her soft pink t-shirt and jeans, and a vibrant blue hair wrap to match her hoodie, also blue. She was using a different colored wrap as a belt. We looked tired because we were. My hair was in between washes.

They make great accessories and substitute well for regular washing

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As we boarded the train in Paris, Aby spotted two chairs facing one another with a table in between them. We snatched those up. We hadn’t been on a train yet that had any tables available to us and we were excited to write on something other than our laps. The thing about trains is that they aren’t yours. Unlike the car you might drive at home, which mimics a second bedroom packed with whatever you want in there—pillows, snacks, a case full of CDs, empty yogurt containers and space to sprawl out in—a train falls short in only really allotting room for your butt, no amenities. The aisles aren’t for you to stretch your feet in; food carts and people are always hurrying by. Your stuff must mainly remain in your backpack and near or attached to your person; the needy are everywhere, and some will steal your shit.

So this table, it had room for four. There was room to spread out, a flat surface to write and rest on. We were elated. It was the highlife so far. Eventually, two women in suits sat beside us. They seemed kind. They were Indian. They had charts and maps and were serious and beautiful. It was a business meeting and they talked the whole time about city planning or global warming, I don’t know. Aby and I happily sat silent as we doodled in our journals. We listened to Simon and Garfunkel

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**Do this:** Tie your backpacks to each other, in whatever way possible, if you’re hoisting them up into an overhead compartment, away from your actual bodies.

Do not lose sight of your stuff and take turns napping!

**-or-**

Two large packs, *attached* is a much more awkward thing to steal than a single bag.

**Tie your bags to your body, if you’re shoving them beneath your seat or on your lap. Wrap one of the straps around your ankle a few times or use the thing as a pillow.**

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because I don’t know if any better music exists for mid-day train rides. We scribbled notes to each other from across the table, upside down and backwards, for the other’s sake. It was pretty funny.

I eventually fell asleep. I used the towel I had packed as a blanket.

Pack a thin towel.  
You can use it as a shall, blanket, turban, or flag.  
Or towel.

Aby didn’t sleep. She stayed awake because she was busy. She wasn’t just watching our stuff; she had other things going on. Aby had packed with her these two very tiny men. They were plastic, and about an inch and a half tall; one was a “cowboy”, the other was an “Indian.” In the United States, they stood upright on the dashboard of her car. In Europe, they served another purpose. Whenever someone (usually me) would fall asleep, Aby’s sole agenda at that moment was to ever…so…delicately place these tiny figures somewhere on the sleeping person’s body without them waking up or noticing.
Whatever, Aby.

We were nearly 60 miles from Brussels when we stopped. It was our stop. I watched the two women next to us fold and roll their materials, put them back neatly into their briefcases, and smooth the wrinkles out of their skirts as they stood. We gathered our stuff from the overhead compartment across the aisle and moved towards the door.

Aby hopped off first, then me. It was still raining, heavier now than before. I scanned the crowd for the businesswomen to see where they were running off to but I couldn’t find them. It seemed in an instant everyone dispersed and disappeared. They caught other trains heading to other places. They hailed cabs and sped off towards home. We looked around aimlessly and then towards each other and began to walk.
It seemed we were in the middle of anywhere. The station wasn’t exactly in the city or near downtown, we knew that much, but that wasn’t much. There was construction going on, so we walked through some unstable walls built with plywood until we found a map we could grab, hanging in a plastic bin along the wall. Aby opened the map. Neither of us reads Flemish, it turns out. Some maps are much better than others. Others are more work than they’re worth. This map was the worst. You shouldn’t even need to read anything to follow a map, really. But nothing on this sheet of paper made any sense. I suggested we just follow the river because it looked like it would lead us into town. Aby continued to pour into the paper. I am a shot in the dark kind of woman, while Aby—thankfully—likes to look at maps. She should have gone into cartography. Having both approaches on our team made for nice balance. If one attempt failed, we tried the other and always ended up somewhere, so that’s good. We were really noteworthy partners in this way. Before we left, we put the map away.

Don’t look at a map in public. It makes you vulnerable by telling everyone you don’t know where you are. You are safest in any city if you act like you know what you’re doing, even when you don’t. So look at that map inside somewhere, like a coffee shop.

Outside, it was still raining. We stopped to put on our pink ponchos. You have never seen such a sight as this. We looked like two forgotten party favors found in the bottom of your purse the morning after a rave in the basement of some warehouse in Miami. Not that I would know. Aby and I were glowing in our gigantic, electric pink ponchos. They had hoods and we wore them, of course.
Pack a poncho. They weigh next to nothing and it will definitely rain. Also, you can look this good:
For the next two hours as we hiked into the city, Aby and I didn’t really see Bruges. Instead, we saw blurred words written in Flemish on street signs reading “Hoestraat” and “Mariastraat”, or mild commands posted on pub doors, like ”Veiligheid eerst!” which we gathered means something like “No, Don’t!” The street signs in Bruges aren’t on posts stuck in the grass on the corner. They’re displayed flat on the sides of buildings. Still green with white type, but repositioned.

We didn’t notice the buildings or the parks. The shops selling nothing but chocolate. Aby and I were in desperate search for words reminiscent of “hostel,” “hotel” or “lodging,” that is all.

We were exhausted. Backpacking is exhausting. It was always during this stretch when we’d start to resent each other, for no reason. Exhaustion maybe. Aby would never admit to this, and you didn’t hear it from me, but I’m sure what we were thinking was this:

She talks too much.
She walks too slow.
She finished the fucking pistachios.
She’s wearing my fucking hair wrap, again.
Bitch.
Whore.

And so on. We were tired and lost and the rain was disappointing. Nothing we’d read about Bruges said anything about rain. You never want to believe when you finally get to that city you’ve been coveting that it’s going to be overcast and shitty out. But so it goes.
The ground, every bench, was wet. Even when we needed to give our backs a rest from all the weight, we didn’t want to put our bags *down* anywhere. We lugged along.

This was always the most challenging part of our travels. Physically, it made me wish I hadn’t tried to be the first one out during all those games of dodge ball back in elementary school. Mentally, it made me wish I had more patience, like my dad. But this was my favorite part. It was the best part. If it weren’t for this stretch, that feeling of accomplishment just wouldn’t be there. Getting off an airplane and hailing a cab, only to pull up right in front of a hotel doesn’t do anything for your self esteem, unless you happen to feel really good about yourself while riding in taxis. But to feel your underarms, and the back of your neck begin to tickle from all that sweat, dripping and soaking into your clothing and behind your knees and even between your toes; sweat from all that walking, from bearing all that weight—none of it would be worth it. That soft bed you finally find in that dilapidated hostel just wouldn’t feel like anything at all. It doesn’t feel like your bed at home. It never does. But it feels earned. And I can’t think of a better feeling.

It is this act of perseverance I love most about travel.

And then, there it was. Tucked up in the Northwest corner of Belgium, as it would turn out, the streets are cobbled, narrow and winding. The houses are stunning; varying shades of brick lie beside one another forming a rainbow of stone and shutter. These homes are cottage-like things where you might expect a nice family of otter to live, or a young couple of well-to-do squirrels. The flowers there are settled comfortably on every window’s sill; their warm, vibrant tones offset with ease the dark evergreen shade of so
many of the shutters. Canals chart the town, like a liquid grid mapping where to go and how to get there. These waterways are set within stone walls which are waist-high, covered in moss and laced heavily with soft, emerald vine; partitions that lend hand to the bridges creeping around every corner, begging for lovers to stop, their photos taken just as their lips come to touch.

If you move away from the outskirts and into the city’s Market Place, you’ll find chateau-type architecture, gothic and immense and pulsating with brilliant, primary colors. These ancient castles form an alcove around the brick-laden square and tower over a stately row of Belgian flags. It all feels very majestic. And magical. And in the middle of it all is a statue of hometown heroes: Jan Breydel and Pieter De Coninck, cast in iron and proudly gazing off into the distance. These men are proud because, in 1309, they fronted the fight against France to keep Belgium its own country and succeeded.
You can feel the pride in the air. It’s like everyone’s thinking right on, you guys. Good job. And thanks.

They call it “The Venice of the North.” It beats Venice, if you ask me.

Eventually, we stumbled into Charlie Rockets. What boasts that it used to be the biggest movie theatre in Bruges, has since converted itself to a trendy hub for backpackers. We walked in off a cobblestone road to what appeared to be a dive bar, which we were not expecting. There were license plates and road signs tacked to the walls; across the room was a fully stocked bar, the top shelf lined in top shelf liquor. This place couldn’t have been further from the London dungeon or our Parisian “suite.”

The room was completely empty. We stood inside for a few minutes before anyone showed up. We hoped someone would come, that there’d be an opening in some room we could squeeze into for the evening. As we waited, I casually considered hopping
over the bar and making ourselves at home. I thought maybe I’d go for the Maker’s Mark. Aby has always been a whiskey girl. She taught me early on the comfort a dark liquor offers. “A shot of whiskey is like a sweater, on the inside,” she’d say. It leaves you feeling warm and loved and cozy, like the weathered knit of a favorite garment.

I never got that sweater. Someone eventually showed up. He showed us to our room.

OUR ROOM.

First of all, our room was HUGE. And we had a sink. It’s not every hostel you find running water in your very own room; usually you’re stuck with a bathroom down the hall. We had options, too. There were beds, everywhere. We were told they were ours. All of them. We could sleep in each one if we wanted; wake up every hour just to switch positions. Bunks beds made of wood, which looked like a little kid’s tree house dreams come true, were scattered about. Aby instantly chose one of the bunk beds, but I like feeling grounded when I sleep. I opted for a plush purple, cushioned mattress—one of many tucked into the sweet corners of our new home. We nestled into our respective beds without saying a word. And there we were. We had made it. Everything felt clean and comfortable and right.

http://www.charlierockets.com/

When we woke next, Aby and I pulled ourselves together. I love this part.

Usually this part consists of dark chocolate and the little battery-operated speakers we’d packed. I plugged in our I-pod; we danced around for a bit, jumped on all the beds, why not? We had nothing to do, really and nowhere specific to go.
I decided on my white sundress that afternoon, which I wore under my grey v-neck sweater and over my olive green yoga pants. I threw one of our two pairs on earrings on, for good measure.

Aby was wearing her long sleeved, royal purple t-shirt with a white one on top and jeans and Converse.

Pack clothing that you can layer. It’s like a whole new challenge during your travels: how can I take these six clothing items and create a new outfit? And when you eventually run out of options, the answer is accessories: hair wraps and earrings. They are lightweight and totally make an outdated outfit new again.

For dudes, I have no idea what men accessorize with. Maybe you could turn your shirts inside out.

Basically, we looked great.

And this is where the reward of all that laborious walking comes into play. This is where the money’s at, people. You trek, then you rest, then you clean yourself up and now it is time to live. You are no longer a tourist, trying to seek shelter and decipher maps in an unknown place. You are an inhabitant of your new home, for however long.

And the locals don’t just observe their city, they live it.

We want to embrace our new environment, not just stare blankly at it.

So, feeling fresh, Aby and I made our way through the entrance/bar of Charlie Rockets, ready to give it our best, to live as the Belgians do. Immediately, we were summoned by a huge chalkboard sign hanging in the lobby that told us what to do:
Shit, okay. We ordered up. I mean, we were backpackers.

Back in Athens, I worked at a microbrewery. I remember my first day: it was mom’s weekend at Ohio University, and being a university town, all the bars accommodated the overabundant number of mothers pouring into the streets, most of them looking to relive their good ole days. Our bar served quiche, and beer, for brunch. We were still getting things off the ground and up and running, but B.C., the brew master, had perfected a few house staples—the Raspberry Wheat, and the Drawn and Portered. I knew those beers. I knew how they tasted on sweaty summer afternoons over a spelt grain pizza on the patio. I knew the way each slid down my throat and cooled my tongue after too big of a bite, when the cheese was still hot. I knew those beers well.

What I didn’t know was what the hell a lambic kriek was?

Our bartender slid over two dark mahogany colored beverages. They were served in glasses with short, stout stems. The bottoms of the cups bubbled out and then tapered in a bit at the top, so they looked fancy, but still masculine. Like if your parent’s champagne flutes were forced to spend a week in the Army reserves, climbing ropes and crawling through the mud and getting screamed at for no reason. These cups were graceful, yet stoic and fearless.

I took one taste of this lambic kriek and my mind slipped back to Athens. Not to the patio at that bar I loved, sipping those beautiful beers I knew, but rather to a rickety
house on Congress St. with my buddy Drew, shot-gunning a terribly flat Coors Light from a can pulled out of a bathtub filled with gas station ice at some crappy house party.

This was so much better than that.

To this day, that sip is the most satisfying first I’ve ever had, and I’ve tried a lot of things. A tad tart from the sour Morello cherries that are fermented with the beer, a lambic kriek keeps you on your toes. First you’re hit with the sour, and then the sweet settles in. But it isn’t overwhelming, or sticky. It’s a subtle rush of the fragrant fruit and then it’s back to the sour. And then your mouth is used to it, and you want more. From here on out you drink it up like nectar. The kriek is a Belgian staple, we soon learned. A nice, light, fruity, heady drunk. Not too hoppy, either. And to top it off, we got a pair of flip-flops with cherries all over them. It was awesome. We decided to use them as our shower shoes. We needed a pair, anyhow.

A pair of shower flops won’t hurt. They’re relatively light, inexpensive and easy to squeeze into your bag. You never know where you’ll end up having to put your feet. If you don’t pack a pair, pick one up somewhere along the way.

Aby and I left the bar feeling fabulous. We headed out like we always did, but something felt different for some reason. London is London and Paris, Paris. It’s almost impossible to go to either without hitting The Globe, The Tate, Big Ben, The Louvre, Mona Lisa, Eiffel Tower; I could go on. We tried our best to make those trips our own; to have a unique experience that went a bit against the grain. But still, in our first two cities it somehow felt like we weren’t alone, like we were taking those trips with the rest of the
world, seeing things because we felt like we had. *You went to Paris and didn’t see the Arc de Triomphe! Whaaa?*

But Bruges, I’d never even heard of Bruges before stepping foot into it. We had no “have to-s” or “must sees;” nobody back home was expecting a picture of me standing next to that famous figure in that world-renown park in Bruges. They hadn’t heard of it, either.

The rain outside had stopped. We began to walk. The streets were crowded. The sun was busy being awesome, and the people were busy enjoying it. Tourists and locals alike were walking into shops empty handed and leaving with armfuls of bundles of stuff. It seems Belgium is known for many things, mainly indulgences. They’ve got chocolate, ice cream, pastries. We looked at all the lovely things displayed in all the storefronts. We knew we couldn’t buy anything but it’s still fun to look. Aby had administered early on a “no-gift” rule for herself on this trip. She told everyone back home not to expect any presents upon her return, sorry. (Aby did, in fact, pick up a few little favors for her niece. I bought a few things here and there for everyone I know because I am an impulsive person and an over-gifter.)

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Don’t kill yourself buying gifts. You may really want that hookah from Turkey for your brother, but don’t burden yourself with anything bigger than the palm of your hand or heavier than a pack of gum.

Think little trinkets: a handmade key chain or a piece of local candy.

Every ounce counts!

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We walked down a thin road lined with restaurants, people dining in their windows and some out front, under umbrellas. We noted the grocery store not too far
from the hostel. Aby scoped out the park we’d eat lunch in the next day. I noticed a
Greek restaurant, which shocked me in this tiny Belgian town.

We eventually meandered towards an ice cream shop, where people had gathered.
A young lady was leaning out of the pick-up window. She was sampling free ice cream. I
remembered all those Sundays spent at Sam’s Club with my parents. All those free
samples! But I reminded myself I was being a vegan on this trip and to honor the decision
I had made. I passed up the sample and went for the disposable spoon. I put it in my
purse.

We eventually got hungry. Aby had read in the Let’s Go! Guide about this
restaurant that featured a veggie stir-fry. It sounded so good. Usually we ate from what
we found in outdoor markets or grocery stores, but would allow one very lavish and
indulgent feast per city. Which meant that we wouldn’t cash out on any old meal. It had
to be worth it.

Eventually, said restaurant was located. After some time we were seated. Our
waitress was a middle-aged woman with an agenda. She seemed a little rough around the
edges, like she’d be an aggressive driver. The kind who doesn’t think it’s cute when the
goose are crossing the street, and the type who honks at your grandma when she’s driving
too slowly. We were hardly seated when this happened:

“What do you want?”

“We were wondering if you use butter in your stir-fry.”

— Very long pause —

“Well, what else would we use?”

“Um . . . Olive oil?” Aby squeaked.
And then the woman ran over our dog.

Shit, we totally forgot we were in Belgium. Belgium, home and proud master of all things indulgent: chocolate, ice cream, beer, butter. Things creamy and sweet and calorie-loaded. Of course they used butter in their stir-fry. It was a ridiculous question, really. However, this stir-fry wouldn’t do, so we left. As you can imagine, this really pleased our waitress. She expectantly rolled her eyes as we departed.

No worries. We remembered that Greek place we had seen earlier in the afternoon, which still shocked me: A Greek restaurant, in a tiny Belgian town, where they don’t know what olive oil is. That’s weird. Earlier in the day they hadn’t been open. Now we thought we’d try again. We set out in search for the only Greeks in Bruges.

We entered and immediately I knew they were real. Real Greeks. It was clear; they stood out. Aby and I always got a kick out of which country we were most popular in. And not as a unit, but as individuals. She is tall, fair-skinned, red-haired; elegantly long, and thin. I am 5’3”. My skin tans well, my hair and eyes are dark, dark. And my ass? I’ve Mediterranean hips from both sides, so there’s that. When we were in Spain, I looked like everyone else, so all the boys pleaded for Aby. She was different, unique. Same goes for Italy; they begged for her. But in Holland, for example, or Austria or Germany, my thick hips ran shit.

We walked into the restaurant and were the only two inside. There weren’t any tables, either. The place looked new and for now, it appeared to be a take-out type joint: Gyros to go, kind of thing. Souvlaki, pastisio, yiaprakia, spanakopita. All the foods I knew and loved, minus the meat and cheese. I noted the lime green walls. Then I saw him. From the back appeared Giorgos, I later learned was his name. Under his navy blue
apron, under his grey, back-of-the-kitchen shirt, he boasted olive-toned arms. It was a shade I knew well, one only the Mediterranean can claim. He had long, dark hair whose curls were pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck. His business partner, whose name I wish I could remember, stood a little lower, was a bit rounder. Giorgos and, we’ll call the other Kostas, were thrilled at us.

We told them straightaway I was Greek, and found a bottle of wine from the motherland waiting for us. It was on the house. So were the next three. They pulled a table for us from the back. We drank and ate all night. Giorgos and Kostas created vegan dishes for Aby and me. Fresh horiatiki—tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and kalamata olives, minus the feta. Patates roasted with olive, lemon and oregano. We dined like royalty. And four bottles of Retsina later, I had to piss like the Trojan Horse. Giorgos let me use the Employees Only bathroom in the back. I thought maybe he’d kiss me, but instead he showed me his icons. Beautiful, ornate depictions of Orthodox saints all tucked into one corner of the backroom, like my parents have in our own home. I stood up on a chair and kissed the icon of the Virgin Mary (my namesake), to show respect, and to let him know I was grateful for this gift he offered to me. I did my cross as Giorgos did his, and then he helped me down from the chair.

From there, Aby, with all her strength, guided me back to Charlie Rockets. Turns out I’d had a little too much Greek wine. With her arm around mine, we meandered through downtown Bruges, illuminated with street lamps on every corner, humming with people who filled the sidewalks with chatter and laughter, enjoying the cafes open late and the energy of the evening. Halfway home, we stopped on some stoop for a rest.
People were still bustling around, but that didn’t matter. I put my head in Aby’s lap. She stroked my hair and sang me songs we both knew all the words to.

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There is a statue in Bruges and it’s by Michelangelo. The ‘Madonna and Child’ depicts The Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. It is the only Michelangelo sculpture that made it outside of Italy in his lifetime, in fact, and today it is only one of a few that remain elsewhere. The sculpture dates back to 1504. It is housed in the Church of Our Lady, a stunning Roman Catholic cathedral, dating back to around the 13th Century. It is the tallest structure in Bruges, and the second tallest “brickwork” tower in the world, peaking at 122.3 meters high. Aby and I went to the church on our last day in the city. Beforehand, we’d gotten coffees that came with Virgin Mary-shaped marshmallows.

I can’t speak for Aby, but inside that church I’d found a solace; a quiet stillness so far from anywhere we’d yet been. It was astounding, standing so close to something so significant, no crowds, like there were at the Mona Lisa. It was a singular moment, just the statue and me.
Something unique struck me about the sculpture, and I didn’t know it then, but I was right. It is a special statue. Michelangelo almost always depicts a young Jesus Christ, coddled safely in the comfort of His Mother’s arms. In Bruges, however, young Jesus isn’t an infant. He’s a toddler. And He isn’t nestled in anyone’s arms, He’s standing upright, only using His Mother’s leg as a crutch, to help, just a little, in holding Him up. It looks like He’s about to take off. And His Mother, She’s looking away, like She knows He needs to go.

On our way to the Church of Our Lady.
CHAPTER VII

ROME

“One doesn’t come to Italy for niceness,” was the retort;  
"one comes for life. Buon giorno! Buon giorno!"

―E.M. Forster, A Room with a View
CHAPTER VIII
PREPARING FOR HOME

Reintegration is hard. After spending a significant amount of time away, no matter how excited you are to be home, actually being there will be hard to adjust to and a little bit weird. It’s okay. I’ll talk you through it.

Don’t be an asshole—Listen: not everyone gives a shit that you went somewhere cool. And although it is cool, what’s not cool is bringing up your awesome trip every time someone new walks through the door. Or showing them all of your photos. No one wants to see them all—not even your mother, although she’ll tell you that she does. She doesn’t. Do this instead: First, don’t bring up the fact that you’ve been away. It is much more rewarding to answer the question “So, what have you been doing all summer?” with a casual “I spent a little time in China,” than it is to tell someone who didn’t ask, that you just did something they probably wish they had done. It is a gift, what you just did. Hold it sacred and only share it with those who truly care and deserve to know. Second, surely you’ve taken a few terrible pictures among all those brilliant ones you shot. Once you’ve downloaded and edited them all, make a special folder and call it “Some Others,” or whatever you want it to be called, and put only your very best selections in it. Save it to the desktop. This way, when someone photos from your trip, there they are. Ready and waiting, for the wanting.
2. **Don’t be afraid to leave the house**—You will absolutely come home with an enlightened perspective. You will see your surroundings with an appreciation or remorse you had never noticed before, and you might feel confused about it. Take a few days to adjust, and relax. Let your body and head re-wrap around their old stomping grounds. When I returned from this trip abroad, I stayed inside for three days. I was terrified of what I’d left behind, that I’d somehow forgotten how to function properly in my normal environment. I was also pissed. I didn’t want to be home and I felt trapped: back in the humdrum of Ohio. You might find yourself feeling this way, too. You’re used to a certain nomadic lifestyle, you vagabond, and you’re afraid to go back to the ways of the past. Know that this is okay and normal, that it will pass, and that being home isn’t really all that bad at all—it’s actually quite nice.

3. **Don’t get all Euro in your reunions**—My first venture outside of the house was to the annual Greek fest in downtown Canton. Litsa made me go. Twenty minutes in, I had managed to avoid seeing anyone I knew. I wiped my perspiring brow in relief at this and took a bite of spanakopita. It was then that I saw it, two tables over: my first familiar face. Suddenly I felt like I was back in Amsterdam on that bridge in the middle of Gay Pride fest. It was there that I ran into Joey Connors and Bobby Carney—two boys who lived in my dorm at OU. I was shocked to see people I actually knew. We hugged and hugged like the best of friends, though in Ohio we were only fairly good acquaintances. It was surreal and exciting. When you haven’t seen a recognizable face in a very long time, this type of reaction is typical. At the Greek fest, the woman I knew had been on the booster club of my
high school soccer team, years before. We were never that close. Her daughter, Katie, was on my soccer team; she and I were never very close, either. But when I saw her that day—Katie’s mom, the nice lady who always brought us Subway on the bus of our away games—my instincts kicked in. I immediately reacted and grabbed her face, kissing both of her cheeks like we’d been doing in Europe all summer. It was a lingering embrace, and I held on for far too long. I knew in my head that what I was doing was unnatural, but my body wouldn’t stop. I was in Euro-mode. As I’m sure you can imagine, it was uncomfortable for everyone.

4. **Don’t forget that people back home speak English**—For several months Aby and I had worked hard on perfecting our broken English/European sign language. It is an art. You want to speak slowly enough for non-native English speakers to be able to understand you, but you don’t want to degrade their intelligence. Talking too slowly or loudly to someone will imply you think they’re unintelligent, and we know that just because someone doesn’t speak English, doesn’t mean they’re dumb. You will also look really stupid speaking this way. Instead, speak with confidence and in a steady tone, but don’t overdo it. You will learn this as you go and get more comfortable with every passing city. The problem was that when we came home, we found this a very hard habit to break. I began to speak to everyone in this very disjointed manner. What worked in Europe actually had the opposite affect in the U.S., and I knew I looked ridiculous. People were starting to get annoyed. They would scrunch their faces and wonder: *what’s wrong with you? Why are you talking like that?* I would wince and remind myself that the people back home speak English.
CHAPTER IX
GOING HOME

Aby was sitting cross-legged in the middle of our queen size bed at the hotel we were at in Barcelona. The bed was almost as large as our room. I sat propped up on the thin table lining the right side of it, just watching. She was rolling her ribbed, grey tank top into a tiny ball. When it was tight enough, compact enough, she placed it into her bag, meticulously to the left and in the corner, next to her jeans. She reached for a t-shirt that would soon be placed beside them both, creating an even layer spread across the bottom of her backpack that would be topped with another, then another, until full. It was an artful game of Jenga we’d perfected by this point.

I took a bite of the stale loaf of bread that sat out on the table overnight. We’d bought it at the market the evening before but had filled up on sangria before finishing the bread. That night had been our last night, arguably our best. Now we were gathering up, preparing to leave Spain, and each other. In an hour we would hail a cab for the airport.

Aby was going home. In fifteen hours she would be surrounded with the familiarities of a traditional Midwestern life: eating dinner at a decent hour—at 5 or 6 instead of 10 or 11; grabbing coffee with a friend on a whim; using her cell phone; driving. She would head into the humid heat of an Ohio summer, take walks without 30 pounds on her back, and eat peanut butter (the one senseless thing about Europeans is their undervalued opinion of it). In less than a day Aby would crawl up the wooden stairs in her home on Jean Ave., passing self-made artwork that proudly hangs on those yellow
walls, and into her bedroom. Here she would stretch out with Jenni—her demanding cat, who would undoubtedly crawl onto her belly, kneading and needing. The comforts of the life that she had built for 21 years would be there, waiting in Akron to embrace her. In only a few short hours she would be home and no longer away, with me.

I got off the table and hopped on the bed beside her, amidst all of my clothes, none of which were packed.

“I can’t do this shit.”

“Do what?” Aby asked

“I don’t know. I don’t even know.” I lifted a tank top with my right hand and threw it to the floor. “What the hell am I doing?”

Aby stopped rolling and tilted her head.

“You’re going to Greece, Maria. Like you did last summer. To meet a hot babe; remember him? You met him that summer. Stavros. You are going back to Greece—to an island—to have hot, beachy sex all day and night with Stavros and you’ll come home with a tan and his baby.” She continued packing. “So what’s the problem, hm?”

“Ugh, okay, yeah. I know. But listen. That’s what we did last summer. This time, it’s different. I don’t know if I’m into it anymore.” I started talking with my hands, for emphasis. “AND—are you listening? The last time I saw Stavros I was ten pounds lighter, wearing a Max Azria backless, sequined shirt, my Gianni Bini strappy heels, AND I had my hair straightener. Don’t you see? All I have now are these fucking Pumas.” I kicked at the air.

“Okay, first of all,” she said. “I met you that summer, and you weren’t ten pounds lighter, dummy. You look exactly the same.”
She was right. Maybe.

“Dude, but that was different. I was in Greece to play then.”

“Oh, and you aren’t going to Greece now to play with Stavros?”

“Hey—I never said that.” I held up both hands, whoa. “It’s just that…I don’t know. It feels different this time.”

Of course it felt different. When Stavros and I had met one year ago, this happened, dream-like, but real life:

Imagine you’re on a beach in the Mediterranean with your mom and older brother. You lay towels, head in for a swim, and as you do, the sounds of a Spanish guitar float gently through the air, soft yet profound, and as rich as the salt in the sea. Your brother wanders off to find the origins of this music; was it a recording, you wondered? It was as if someone nearby were watching, predicting exactly what you’d like to hear right at that very moment, then poof! There it was, loud enough for only you and those who really mattered to hear, like your own private soundtrack pumping through stereos hidden within white stucco homes and between each smooth stone that covered the beach. You’ve just finished with your swim when you head out of the water, slowly—the salt is thick and it takes a bit of effort—towards your towel and your mother. You’re drying your torso when she tells you: You must meet Stavros. So you go. You follow your mother’s finger as she points you up the stairs to the two-story home a mere fifteen feet from the foot of the beach. You climb, still glistening from your swim, and stumble upon your brother sitting in front of a bucket turned on its head; he’s playing it like a drum. And there’s Stavros. A real Greek god, on guitar. You begin to talk. Your brother doesn’t speak much Greek, and yours isn’t perfect, but it’s decent and will do. Stavros’ English is
the same. But smiles are universal. Your brother mentions music, that the two of you have similar tastes. And books, too. Stavros points to what he’s reading. “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Nikos Kazantzakis. You dig through your bag, pull out “Freedom and Death.” Also by Kazantzakis. He mentions Tom Waits. You love Tom Waits. The three of you decide to go for a swim. He kisses you first at a crowded bar later that evening when your brother slips away for a moment. You’re surrounded by bodies but it seems only two are there: yours and his. “You promise a lot with those eyes,” he says, tempting you to keep your promise. And you do. The rest of the summer, you do.
“Aby, no way in hell this summer ends up like it did last summer. Last summer was a dream. Look: don’t leave. Come with me. Or we can go back to Mondsee, or Munich! We loved Munich, let’s go back there and learn to surf like those guys in that river—”

“Maria,” she said calmly. “You know I would, but I can’t. Listen. You’ll be fine; I know it. You’re just nervous because you haven’t seen him in over a year and your mom wants you to marry him and all that. But look: if Stavros doesn’t like your Pumas—which are awesome—then he can go fuck himself.” She smiled. “I mean, right?”

I nodded.

“Besides, you’ll be home soon. And I’ll be there when you get back.”

She was right, but the apprehension persisted. I knew I was going somewhere safe, somewhere intimate and comfortable, familiar. Greece, for me, feels second nature, like your best friend’s parents house where you spent nearly as many childhood hours as you did in your own. My dad was born there. My mom’s dad—my pappou—was born there too. On the same island, no less—in Chios. It is pure coincidence how my parents met in Michigan when their relatives are living only blocks from each other on one of Greece’s countless islands. I look like the people there; eat like they do and appreciate their timelessness. Whenever I show up hours late in the States, no one understands. But in Greece, everyone is on “Greek Time” and everyone knows only xení—“non-Greeks”—show up anywhere early, let alone on time.

I am blessed by Greece; by the handful of times I have been afforded a trip there. My parents never took us on annual vacations. The only time I made it to Disney World
was with the 248 other members of the GlenOak High School marching band. I was 18. Hilton Head I only ever saw once, a gift from a friend who took me as her guest. The normal things families seemed to do when the school year ended and the sun got a little hotter, I never experienced. But every few summers or so, we would get to go home, to Chios.

I began to pack my stuff. Aby and I switched spots; she took over gnawing at the bread and I began to roll my clothes on the bed, trying to figure out from where all this recent anxiety was stemming. We’d spent two months unsure of everything, but I hadn’t felt this uncertain about any of that like I did about this.

I knew Chios, or Greece, wasn’t the problem. I couldn’t wait to see my family, to eat my favorite horiatiki salata, to sip a Nescafe at my cousin’s cafetería, right on the harbor of my second home.

Aby pulled out her journal; did some writing. I’d fallen a bit behind with mine, trailed off somewhere in Amsterdam, but Sullivan kept right at it. I continued to pack.

What panicked me, I thought, was knowing I wasn’t the same girl who’d met Stavros that summer, and I knew that’s what he wanted. Since Stavros, I had conquered Europe. I wasn’t a teenager, listless, bored and traveling with her parents any longer, a suitcase full of shoes at her disposal. I was now a woman of the world! Our trip had shown me that I could do anything; that I could honestly handle anything. Aby and I had just made it through eight countries—thirteen cities—every single one of those days left entirely to our own devices. The choices we made were ours to make; we owned our triumphs as well as our mistakes, and we were assured in them. Certain that whatever we decided to do would work out in the end, whether it was everything we’d dreamed it
would be, or the worst thing we could imagine. With Aby, for the past two months—from London to Paris, Holland to Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Spain—I had developed a sense of individuality, even with her by my side. She only complemented my confidence. Without her, I was terrified I’d lose that. And with Stavros, I had a feeling I certainly would.

We threw our bags onto our backs for the last time and left Barcelona. At the airport, we made a pact: part ways, no looking back. It’d be easier that way. So I went left and she went right.

I was focused overhead, at the huge sign hanging above the concourse in order to make sure I was headed in the right direction, toward the right gate. It had been a long while since I had to figure something like this out on my own; I already felt the weight of her absence. Two minutes later—that’s when I heard her.

“Maria!” I turned. Aby was standing behind me. She shoved her journal into my chest. “Take this. You can read it while you’re gone, but I want it back—and yours—when you get home. I’ll see you then.”

I hugged her one last time then made my way to Concourse B, heading to Greece.

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I woke to a thin, vertical sliver of sunlight. The door had cracked open only an inch, but I could tell that it was almost noon. The sun was high; I watched its reflection move with the tide only feet from the foot of the bed, out the door and down the flight of limestone steps, which led directly to sand. I saw others, out for a tan, a swim. I’d slept late that day.
I sat up, yawned, looked around. The sheets were crumpled at the end of the bed; undoubtedly I’d kicked them there during the night as I tried to sleep, restless from the heat and other things.

Stavros had proven me correct, was absent that morning when I woke, as he had been all the others. I hoped for a moment that he was close, maybe playing guitar out on the balcony, like he had that afternoon when we’d first met. But I wouldn’t let myself get swept up with that. I didn’t hear him anyway. I pushed the idea aside, over the balcony and into the water.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, facing the door, and put my feet down onto cool, smooth cement. I stood and turned to face a lone mirror, hanging on the wall. I pulled my hair into a bun. It went up effortlessly. I stared at myself. I looked good with my hair out of my face, I thought. I felt justified in that.

I pulled the heavy wooden door open, towards me. Sunlight filtered in, quickly inhabiting the whole room. I stepped out onto the balcony. There was a family of five, two adults and three children, swimming directly beneath me. I scanned the water for a glimpse of him; came up empty. I was sure I knew where he was anyway; out for a coffee, most likely, with some other summer lover.

Two weeks prior, my arrival in Athens was filled with confidence. I got off the plane and headed down the concourse with everyone else, feeling good, feeling good. Before leaving Spain, I had really considered what to wear for this flight. My first thought was to go with my best looking outfit; an olive green sundress I’d bought in Italy—one of the only indulgent items I’d purchased on our trip. I knew Stavros would
like the dress; that I’d look like the lady he remembered. But when I was packing up and gathering an outfit for the plane ride, I found myself doing what we’d been doing all summer on travel days: yoga pants, tank top, tennis shoes; function and comfort, of course.

“This will have to do for him,” I said to Aby.

“Exactly.” She agreed. “What man doesn’t like a lady in yoga pants?”

I continued on through the airport, following the masses blindly. I soon realized we were at baggage claim, and I hadn’t any baggage to claim. My backpack was on my back. I looked dead ahead: the man who had been sitting beside me on the plane was embracing a woman in white Capri pants. To my right: an older couple was hugging what looked like their grandchildren. Everyone looked at ease, except me. Now is when I discovered I didn’t know what to do next.

Somehow I’d forgotten how airports worked; couldn’t remember where I was meeting Stavros, if I’d even told him when I’d be arriving. Did he have a cell phone? I didn’t know. I didn’t have a phone. In a brief moment of clarity, I found a booth selling calling cards. I bought one, found a pay phone and tried to use it. I had his house number somewhere. Country code first, right? Then area code, then number? I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

I decided I’d just walk. I would walk and eventually I had to find him.

An escalator presented itself to me, and I took it. Down to the ground floor I was headed when I saw him. He was riding up. Stavros was only five feet in front of me and in an instant he was right beside, moving in the opposite direction.
“Maria!” He shouted. I remembered then how lovely it sounds when he says my name, rolls that ‘r’ right there in the middle of it. He bounded down the escalator as it fought to oppose him, moving upwards still.

“Stavros,” I said, and there we were, in front of each other, finally. He smiled.

That night we went to his parent’s apartment in Athens. He drove. I hadn’t been in the passenger seat in a long time. It felt pretty luxurious. I tried to push my instincts behind me, to brush off the initial weirdness to the distance and the fact we hadn’t seen one another for a long time. I’d learned a thing or two in college by this point. I was studying Communications and knew that this was a natural occurrence in long distance relationships. Okay, I thought. It’s fine. Here we go.

Stavros led me inside through the front door; there was a baby grand piano in the foyer. A staircase wound its way up and around to the right, leading to a second floor. He ushered me into the kitchen; it was made of marble. Did I need some water? Anything to eat? I politely declined. He was sweet, concerned. Trying to do whatever he could to make me feel comfortable. I felt hopeful.

No one was home. We went upstairs. He drew a bath.

“I like that I can take care of you,” he said.

Then he did. He took care of me like he had last summer.

But as badly as I wanted it to, it didn’t feel the same.

The next morning we took a boat to Chios.

Take the boat.
Even if there is a plane, take the boat.
It was a very large ship. I had never seen anything like it. Inside, we had assigned seats, like on an airplane, only four or five times as wide and with several floors. I didn’t have much luggage, which was convenient. We threw my backpack on our seats then went on deck for the ten-hour ride to the island.

Our first night on the island, Stavros took me to dinner, to La Bussola. It was the one restaurant in Chios I remembered by name; my brother and I would always go as kids. It was different from the other eateries lining the harbor there in Chios; they served pizza. But it was the best pizza. When Stavros brought me there that night, I was ecstatic. I couldn’t wait to taste something familiar.

Before dinner that evening, we’d dressed in separate rooms. I’d wondered why. We’d been intimate only the evening before. But we were still getting comfortable with each other, I thought. And I respected that Stavros respected my privacy.

When ready, we met on the balcony and made our way, barefoot, from his second story bedroom, down to the beach and up toward town.
I had on a plain grey tank top that I’d purchased in Munich, at H&M. Aby bought the same one, we both liked it so much. It flattered Aby’s small chest and my thin shoulders; accentuated my chest and her stomach. It was cotton, simple; one of those staple items you’ll find in any girl’s closet. I wore a long necklace with it. I looked great.

Stavros wore his hair down, like he did most nights. It was long, way beyond his shoulders, a sweeping expanse of curls, and golden brown like his skin. He looked more Roman to me than he did Greek, but handsome nonetheless. Stavros was extremely handsome. I felt secure when next to him; he was much taller than me, the tallest man I’d ever really been with. And his whole physique was strong, though his muscles were natural and unoffending. He got them from swimming mostly, which he did every day, or from running. His body was not the manufactured product of free weights lifted in a sterile gym. He had a body of health, of activity and fresh air. We looked good together.

That night Stavros wore pants; linen most likely, off-white and sweeping the floor just slightly as we tracked through the sand toward the main road. His ass looked great in those pants; I trailed behind him for a moment as I noticed, cuffing my jeans a few times at the ankles so they wouldn’t get sandy.

A gentleman, I soon remembered, Stavros pulled out my chair. He sat across from me, smiled. I could tell he was thinking about what to say to me, how to start this conversation, when the waiter appeared.

In Greek, he ordered for us both.

This was something new. I had never experienced someone ordering for me without asking what I wanted first. I worked through my thoughts on it.
When I was back in Ohio, running register at Bagel Street, I loathed when a couple came in together to order, and this took place:

“Yeah uh, I’ll have a Lyle Love’s It on garlic with mayo, no onion. And she’ll be having a Popeye’s Pleasure on pumpernickel.”

I would think: Oh, really? Are you sure that’s what she wants. I mean, she’s right there. She could just tell me herself. She isn’t an invalid, sir.

But the women never said a thing; didn’t seem to be bothered by a thing.

I was bothered by it. I knew that I was, but in part, I also kind of liked it. I felt like…an adult, in a grown-up relationship so intimate the one knows exactly what the other one wants. Maybe that’s what all those women thought at the bagel shop. I felt taken care of in a sense, and flattered by his memory, ordering a vegetarian dish. I was a vegetarian when we’d first met and still was at the time, but what Stavros didn’t know, or think to ask me about, was how I had been practicing veganism with Aby our whole trip.

Either way, I didn’t bring it up. The two of us were still getting reacquainted. It was clear that the time and distance had affected our chemistry. I was hoping to bridge this gap immediately, hoping to prove myself wrong.

Our waiter at La Bussola came with our food—a colossal thing: dough, vegetables, and cheese, all fresh and local—straight from their wood burning oven. A Greek twist on an Italian classic: kalamata olives, capers, horta (dandelion greens) and feta cheese, among other things.

With this too, I was torn.

In part it felt almost like failing, to eat the dairy on this thing. I had been vegan for two months, my choice, and I honored that decision until now. It felt like I was giving up.
But another part of me was excited; I loved goat cheese and it was absolutely the best in Greece. This was my culture, anyway, I told myself. I wasn’t failing, I told myself—I was choosing to embrace my roots. Though a small fragment of me felt that maybe I was doing it to embrace Stavros, that I didn’t want him to think I was crazy, a Greek girl a vegan? It was unheard of. Go eat some lamb. I didn’t feel like explaining myself.

Stavros cut me a huge piece of the pizza and put it on my plate. I got out my fork.

We talked about other things: who we were now, a year later. He was busy with his music and working at his family’s restaurant, taking courses at university. An adult, he was very clear to make that clear, doing adult things. At 28, he was the oldest I’d ever been with. He did kind of seem like an “adult,” I guessed.

I told Stavros what I’d been up to. At school, getting my degree. Working at a bagel shop, bartending, hanging; typical things.

“Maria, you haven’t eaten anything.”

In truth, I had. I just hadn’t eaten much. Part of me considered not telling him, thought that it wasn’t necessary to inform him I’d been anorexic and bulimic for the past five years in a serious kind of way. I had been vomiting every day the summer we met, but didn’t feel it was anything he needed to know about then. Aby knew and when we were traveling together, she made sure I ate; I promised her I wouldn’t throw up if I could help it. She told me if I had to, she’d be there, but hoped she wouldn’t need to be. We did really well together; I was pretty proud of myself that summer.

“I don’t like to eat too much at one time,” I said. And then I told him why.
“Ah, Maria.” He sounded disapproving. “You know,” he shook his head. “You are so very young. This is a childish thing to do, you know? You’ll grow up soon, eh? And you won’t be wearing jeans anymore.”

I considered speaking but couldn’t even find the words.

I knew what it was, then. The apprehension, the weird tension. Stavros was expecting someone else—Maria from summers passed. The woman who gave him what he wanted, and in heels, to boot. And what he got instead was what he thought was a child. A drama queen, who threw up on weekends for attention, who desired “skinny” so the cool guy in school would ask her out.

As if, Stavros. I was suffering from an addiction, an affliction far too many men and women struggle with their whole lives. Therapy and medication and a whole lot of will power later, I had finally learned to curb it. For the first time, alone and without any help, I was treating my body well. I knew he didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Yeah, I know, it’s a juvenile thing I guess. But when it happens to you, you don’t plan for it. It just kind of, takes over…”

I trailed off. I hated every word that was coming from my mouth, so I just stopped. I didn’t like this version of myself. She was old and weak.

And what the fuck was wrong with my jeans?

I realized then that I had never actually heard Stavros say anything of consequence; he and I had never talked. There was a physical chemistry that ran thick through our blood when we were together last summer; that was undeniable. He’d whisper phrases in Greek into my ear as he dipped into my waist, cradled my back onto the bed. I would purr verse and linger suggestions into his neck, breathe them down his
back, his arms, his chest. The two of us knew well enough how to leave the other wanting, always desiring more of this physical thing we both had; in that, we were fantastic.

But it wasn’t until this night at La Bussola that it hit me: I didn’t know a thing about him. I had no idea his ideals, but I was learning them well this evening.

I looked at Stavros from across the table. He was signaling the waiter over, for the bill. God, he was handsome. But it was clear that if we weren’t using our hands, we didn’t know what to do with each other. I knew he knew it, too. So, I didn’t try. I took another bite of my food.

“Maria, you know…” he said, thinking. “I care about you, you know. A lot. You’re like…my little sister."

And there it was.

When the waiter came five very long minutes later, he asked us if we’d like a box. This monstrous pizza, which was the greatest thing about our “date” that evening, wasn’t even half eaten.

I thought about how good it would taste later, when I could relax and actually enjoy it.

Stavros did not even respond with words, he just sort of: shook-his-hand, waving our waiter away.

I wanted to scream. And of course, I said nothing.
After we left, we walked down to the water’s edge. Some people a little older than I was were sitting there, out on some chairs. Stavros seemed to know them, wanted to say hello. When we got there, it seemed like he wanted to stay. And that he felt burdened by me, that he couldn’t. He never introduced me. I felt embarrassed standing there, obvious in my jeans and ashamed that this why I had come to Greece.

We slept that night and that was all.

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Stavros walked me onto the large ship that was taking me back to Athens. He was supposed to come with me, but extended his stay on the island, due to illness. I knew why he was really staying, and I didn’t care.

Stavros led the way to my seat. We were a little behind—Greek time; all the other passengers were already seated, watching. I wondered what he’d do, how he’d say good-bye. He got me settled. And like the first time, he bent at the waist like he meant it and kissed me on the lips.

I knew we looked it, the part. He was tall and handsome; I was little and fit well within the contours of his body. We looked good together.

I also knew his kiss was full of it, that he did it to satisfy me and I hated him for that, but still I liked that other people were watching, thinking at least that we were a functioning couple.

He said good-bye—“Yia sou, Maria”—and left.

I felt like I could finally breathe.
Once I got settled, I started replaying my trip—not Greece, but Barcelona. And Paris, Cinque Terra, London, Amsterdam, Bruges. I thought about that one time in Munich when Aby and I were walking with our backpacks, she was looking left and I was looking right. Somehow we turned toward the other at the exact same moment and smacked—hard—into each other. We laughed for such a long time about that.

That’s when I remembered: her journal. I immediately dug through my bag, pulled it out, opened it. A sheet fell, a perforated page that had been ripped out of another notebook, white, with lines. Written in purple crayon, was Aby:

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I am really into
LOVE with being
your friend and I
hope you know how
hard this month will
be without you

with me.

This should keep
you company. I’ll
send it back when
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To: your dear lady.

Also, I want to read yours and I can't wait to write another one for you NEXT SUMMER.

May Eva take over Africa 2009!

Love you!

Eva GML
It was October. Aby was pulling her hair back into a tight ponytail. It had grown since I’d last seen her, was a little less red. She was careful not to mess up her bangs, which were also new, as she pulled a red hair band from up around her neck and onto the top of her head.

She turned from the mirror and stared at me.

“Ah! I can’t believe I haven’t seen you in so long—a whole month!” Aby grabbed at my face. “You look so…different, much more mature.” She grinned.

“Oh, shut up, I do not.” I darted playfully from her lobster hands. “I look exactly the same.”

“Yeah, you’re right, except for your hair. I can’t believe you cut it just for this. That’s pretty badass, Varonis.”

“Well, if I’m going to play the part as Jackie O. I figured I might as well go big or go home. I told her: ‘Just chop it. Do it.’ She took ten inches.”

“Well worth it.”

“I think so.”

We were at the Pink House, getting ready for an Athens Halloween. I’d poured us each a glass of champagne. We toasted. The Avett Brothers were playing on my record player. Aby had introduced me to them. “At the Beaches” was on and we were whistling to it together. I was helping Aby put on her turtle shell. She was Raphael.

“Glad you came, Sullivan.” I held her hairband in place as I lifted the shell over her head and situated it on her chest.

She smiled: “Where else would I be?”

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CONCLUSION
TO END

There’s something about leaving that makes you know what you’ve got waiting home; that weathered sofa set your mom gave you when you first moved into an apartment of your own, the one with the stains on the arms that you keep trying to cover with pillows and throws; you’ll never know the comfort and consistency of that ratted hand-me-down unless you give it a little alone time—then you’ll understand. Come home, plop down. You’ll nap in the warm sun of August or the cool shade if it’s October, the breeze beaming through the window and you’ll appreciate the season through a new lens like you’ve never before and you’ll sleep and awake and know that it feels this good to be home because now that you’re back, it’s like you’d never left. But somehow, it’s better. And don’t you want to know what your couch feels like after you’ve missed it for a while?
Eating out is expensive. In my regular life I don’t do it three meals a day, so why would I in Europe? Aby and I weren’t just on vacation abroad; we were living there, and without generating any income to boot. For these reasons we crafted our meals from local markets and groceries and saved a lot of money doing it. We dined out of a plastic Tupperware brought from home. Whatever was purchased was chopped (the underside of our Tupperware lid doubled as a cutting board) or opened (we made sure to buy cans with pop tab lids that don’t require a can opener) and put into our Tupperware. From here we would season, mix, or “blend” the ingredients to our liking. Our results were inspired.

An additional perk of picnicking was our ability to invite new friends to join us. Aby and I met two ladies in Paris one evening by the Moulin Rouge. We made plans the next afternoon to meet at the Louvre; we could bring a grain and hummus, they would bring the fruit and dessert. Both groups would provide a bottle of wine. No one spent any more money than usual but we were able to dine on twice as much food and company.

Another reason for our eating habits that summer was our dietary choice. It’s hard enough eating out as a vegan in the States—no butter, no cream, no whey, no cheese. But throw a language barrier into the equation and we had no choice but to get creative when it came to mealtime. The following recipes respect this decision, but a block of cheese or a stick of salami could be easily substituted for a can of beans in any of the following recipes. Bon Appetit!
**STAPLE ITEMS**

*Sriracha Hot Sauce, Lemon Juice, Salt & Pepper*  
These items added a lot of flavor to what might otherwise be a bland dish.  
*Salt and Pepper packets stolen from McDonald’s*

**Pita Bread or Wraps**  
These breads are lightweight and can be rolled for easy storage. Sometimes hunger hits and having emergency carbohydrates on hand never hurts.

**UTENSILS**  
Collect as many throw-aways as you can from casual dining restaurants. Try to have one of each: fork, knife, spoon on hand at all times.

**DIPS**  
Can be eaten with pita as a stand-alone meal or as a nice spread alongside another dish.

**OUR FAMOUS GUAC.**  
-one/two avocado  
-lemon  
-one tomato  
-one red onion  
-salt and pepper  
Chop the veggies, season in Tupperware, enjoy.

**HUMMUS.**  
-one can of hummus  
-lemon  
-sriracha  
-salt and pepper  
Get the hummus from the can into your Tupperware. Accent it with lemon or hot sauce. Stir. Enjoy.
MEALS TO SHARE

Best served with a fresh baguette and a bottle of local wine in a park somewhere.

EUROPEAN BEAN SALAD.
- one can of beans (cannellini, kidney, or garbanzo) with a pop tab lid
- one onion
- one cucumber
- one red, yellow, or orange pepper
- any other vegetable that looks good
- lemon
- salt and pepper

KICKED UP SALSA.
- one jar of salsa
- one can of corn
- one can of black beans

Pairs really nicely with Our Famous Guac. & pita bread.

SPANISH SANGRIA.
- one large watermelon
- one orange
- a bunch of grapes
- any other fruit in season
- one/two bottles of red wine
- any sweet liquor or brandy, if possible.

Cut a large hole into the top of the watermelon. Eat a large majority of its contents; replace with other fruits. Fill with alcohol and smile at your accomplishment:
Our cutting board and utensils.