

CARA'S VOYAGE

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by

Tiffany Campbell

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Thesis written by

Tiffany Campbell

Approved by

_____, Advisor

_____, Chair, Department of English

Accepted by

_____, Dean, Honors College

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Introduction

I chose to write a creative work for my thesis because I strongly believe in the power of novels, for they have the ability to transcend boundaries and change people's views through the exploration of other's perspectives. By writing a creative piece rather than a critical one, I had more artistic freedom, was able to appeal to a wider audience, and was able to better depict my ideas about travel and people with special needs. I feel that writing a novella has given me an exceptional chance to apply what I have learned about literature during my time as an English major. While writing, I had a chance to reflect on the literary techniques and ideas that I learned through reading and analyzing literature and was able to utilize them for my own writing. The combination of my education at Kent State and my time on study away programs has given me knowledge about the importance of books and the significance of going to new and different places; I have channeled these things into the novella I have written.

When I began my thesis preparation, even though I knew I wanted to write fictional prose, deciding on a specific topic was a challenge. I realized that I wanted to portray the experience of traveling and how it can be a significant time of growth. I had almost not studied abroad, and I know many people struggle with the decision themselves, so I wanted to write about how incredible it is and how it can change one's life and perspectives. By writing about various locations in Europe, I want to give those

who cannot go to those places an opportunity to do so through my narrative while also inspiring others to go on a trip themselves.

While I was trying to figure out the specifics of my characters, I had an encounter in Glasgow, Scotland, that provided me with an idea for my protagonist, Cara. One night at my hostel, I was being unintentionally noisy and apologized for it to a girl who was in the bunk bed next to mine. She responded by signing and telling me that she was deaf. That encounter made me think about how different sightseeing would be if one were living with special needs. She and I were exploring in the same place, but our experiences would be very different. My thesis and characterization of Cara does not aim at representing all deaf people or all people with disabilities, but I recognize that much of society still has limited views and opinions of those who are “different.” It is often a challenge to find works of literature where a minority character is described outside of stereotypes or where that which makes them a minority is not their only defining feature. My thesis, therefore, is something through which the readers can connect to the main character and empathize with her struggles, only at the end coming to the realization that she is more different than they knew. At the same time that Cara realizes it herself, I want the reader to understand that deaf people can and do live fully just the same as hearing people.

Another motivation of mine for completing this thesis is to put in writing the essentialness of going abroad. In particular, I want to represent the aspect of maturing while doing something one considers adventurous, regardless of through what lens one might have one’s experiences. Therefore, while my ideas for the various settings of the

story came from my own excursions, my thesis was shaped and inspired by other literary works. To successfully portray my characters, I have emulated the structural and thematic aspects from other pieces of literature.

Prominent themes and techniques in my thesis, which I will discuss hereafter, were informed by Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*. The *Decameron*'s concepts of stories within stories and the importance of storytelling were influential in my decision to have Cara read a journal during her journey, which is something that is critical to my novella's development. Cara's reading and learning from a book while traveling also came from personally reading Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* during my own trip through Europe. *Daughter and Smoke and Bone* was essential to the themes of growth and maturation in my thesis. While there are plenty of bildungsromans, no book has been more influential to me than *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*. The novel operates around the idea that hope is powerful and necessary, which is a concept I also use by showing the transformation of Cara's outlook.

The literary inspiration for my characterization of Cara came from Cece Bell's *El Deafo*, Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind*, Kristin Cashore's novels *Fire* and *Graceling*, and excerpts from *Beauty is a Verb*. Cara's progression in terms of her self-perception and outlook on life was also inspired by the protagonist of *El Deafo*, which is an autobiographical comic written by a woman who became deaf in her youth. *Out of My Mind* was also an important reference text for my thesis concerning a protagonist with special needs. The protagonist of *Out of My Mind* has cerebral palsy but does not allow herself or others to limit her because of it; my goal in writing the progression of my

protagonist is to display her as someone who is learning to be the same way with her own disability as the protagonist of *Out of My Mind* is with hers. Similarly, my characterization of Cara was inspired by Kristin Cashore's portrayal of two characters in her novels *Fire* and *Graceling*. In these books, two main characters become disabled and subsequently have to come to terms with their disabilities and the fact that they can still live full lives as they were before. Like Cashore touches on in her novels, my thesis is built off of the idea that people with special needs are not incapable of accomplishing the same things they could have if they were "normal." *Beauty is a Verb*'s representation of people with special needs was the main motivation for writing my protagonist as deaf without explicitly saying she is until the very end. The excerpts from *Beauty is a Verb* are written by disabled people who relay what it is like living in an abled world alongside abled people. The authors' perspectives demonstrated how abled/hearing people often misunderstand or unfairly treat those who are considered disabled merely because they are different, and I wanted to avoid such preconceived ideas about disability in my thesis.

As I stated before, I believe that creative works, especially novels, are incredibly influential due to their tendency to alter people's perceptions of the world, other people, and themselves. Through literature, a reader can discover insight into something new or different. Reading is often compared to traveling because the two are similar in their ability to present new things and offer new outlooks. As the author Anna Quindlen said, "Books are the plane, and the train, and the road. They are the destination, and the journey. They are home." There are many books, authors, and quotes I could call to mind that exemplify how transformative and essential reading is, but I would rather offer up

my own novella and hope that it conveys just how impactful both travel and literature can be.

Boneyard

She'd been on a college tour when she got the message. The words – *Sweetheart, I need you to come to the car out front. We need to leave* – would be forever ingrained in her memory.

The urgency in the following messages after she hadn't responded for a minute or two had alarmed her. She had no idea why she should have to leave her campus tour, especially in such a random hurry. The campus seemed really nice and accessible, and her parents wanted her to pick a good college, right? A little irritated, she left, and she would forever wish she could go back in time to happy ignorance. That was the day she lost her best friend. That was the day she lost her dad.

All she could think for days and weeks was that, no, it just couldn't be. It just wasn't possible. Her dad was young and happy, and she could still feel the kiss on her forehead he had given her as she got out of the car for her tour. Even after the funeral preparations were under way and it was startlingly and painfully clear that she would never be able to see him again, would never get to hug him again, and would never get to admire his strength and kindness again, her mind kept telling her that it was all just one big joke.

With the heart wrenching pain she felt, she wished it would rain. She wished it would pour down rain and that the sky would flash with angry lightning. A rainstorm would make her surroundings reflect the mood she felt permeating the air. The absence of

morbid weather felt like a slap in the face, a disregard for her emotions. If the Earth were going to go on spinning, the weather should at least reflect her state of mind. An earthquake would do nicely, too. Anything would be better than the brilliant blue sky, the fluffy clouds shaped like woodland creatures, and the warm sun beating down on the grave in front of her. The dirt over the grave was painfully fresh. The grave was so new that it didn't even have a gravestone yet, just a little white sign that read *Henry J Grimshaw* as a place marker for where her father would be for the rest of eternity.

It had already been two weeks since the accident, since the day her mom had picked her up from her college campus tour and told her that her father's car had been hit by a drunk driver on his way to the store to pick up the cookies Cara had asked him to get. Between that day and the funeral, they had had to wait for family and friends to congregate, to bring flowers and food and sympathy. After the dirt was piled on his casket, though, everyone had left immediately, back to the house for socialization. Cara had never felt less like socializing. If she never saw a smiling face again, she would be content. She was grateful for the silence wrapped around her like a blanket. It encompassed her and held her in its familiar embrace. In the silence, she felt her grief. She closed her eyes and remembered what it looked like to see her father laugh. She held the funeral program in her hands so tightly that the paper crumpled.

She knew she must look absolutely bizarre, standing frozen and wide-eyed in front of what looked like a pile of dirt, though such a sight was probably expected in a graveyard. She was wearing all black, from her flats to her headband, and she knew her red hair stood out with startling contrast. She had her dad's hair, not her mom's ordinary

brown hair. She had her mom's eyes, though – an intriguing shade of brown she loved to stare at in the mirror on occasion. She felt like she had a perfect balance from both of her parents, but she had spent the last two incredibly long weeks focusing on the pieces of her she knew she had gotten from her dad. It felt comforting in a way that felt impossible, as if surrounding herself with every reminder of her dad could bring him back just a little. She even pinpointed habits she learned from him, cherishing them and indulging in them as much as possible. She had been drinking grape Kool-Aid like it was ambrosia just because her dad liked to drink it during their weekly movie nights. She had also bought two cases of Yoo-Hoo, an unremarkable brand of chocolate milk her dad always bought her after school tests as a reward for hard work. She had taken to smothering her cat with affection, not only as a channel for her grief, but because the cat, Mae, had been rescued as a kitten by her father.

Cara clutched onto anything and everything she could think of to connect her to her father, everything but her love of travel. To most people, this seemed especially bizarre because she had always wanted to travel the world, starting in Europe, and her father and she had spent years trying to plan the perfect trip. They had both been putting spare change in Mason jar after Mason jar, saving up for the day when the trip would happen. Every summer, they had taken road trips to various landmarks around the United States in preparation for the big trip out of the country. He had fostered her love for other cultures and places. Without her father, her wanderlust was null and void. Traveling was their thing, and she couldn't imagine ever even thinking about doing it without him. She knew that wasn't how he would want her to feel, but she couldn't help it. She had even

packed up her Mason jars and attempted to donate all of the money to organizations against intoxicated driving, the epidemic that stole her father. Her mom had stopped her, though, telling her to give it time and thought. Her mom, Leslie, had taken the jars and hidden them someplace, her own hands clutching them as if her husband's soul had taken up residence in the glass money containers.

Cara's mom had even been hinting that Cara's giant inheritance from her father could be added to the money from the jars to really make her travel plans possible. Time and time again, Cara refused to even acknowledge the money. She told her mom to put it in a bank account or something because she had no intention of spending it, especially not on travel. The way Cara saw it, the money was one of her last links to her dad. The money represented lost birthdays and Christmases and her approaching high school graduation. Every gift or dinner or random coffee from Starbucks that she would now never receive from her dad was reflected in that money. Not only would she not spend it, but she didn't think she even could bring herself to do so if she wanted to.

A gentle tug on her shirt sleeve brought Cara back from deep in her mind. Her best friend since kindergarten, Eleanor, stood by her right elbow. Eleanor had opted for a grey outfit instead of black because she had made it one of her goals in life to never wear anything black. Eleanor was cheerful and compassionate, and the thought of someone as happy as her dressing completely in black seemed unnatural. She had even started going by Ellie instead of Eleanor after she decided that *Eleanor* was too complicated and that the nickname *Ellie* sounded more upbeat. Her appearance fit her personality, too, with her dirty blonde hair – usually tied up in a long ponytail – and deep blue eyes. Her eyes

looked red and swollen now, though, with all of the crying she had been doing recently. Since Cara and Ellie had become friends, Cara's father had treated Ellie like she was his daughter, too. She had her own parents at home, but she always felt like Cara's parents were an extra set she had. Losing Henry was more painful than Ellie could have imagined, but she knew that Cara was suffering even more. Cara was so devastated that she hadn't been able to shed a tear all day. Ellie knew Cara was trying to be strong for her mom, but she also suspected Cara was too numb with the overwhelming grief as well. Henry's death had been incredibly abrupt, which made it all the more painful because they hadn't even had a chance to say a proper goodbye. Ellie made sure to keep her hand on Cara's elbow for a little bit in an effort to ground her and bring her mind back from wherever it had wandered off.

Your mom called. People are starting to leave, and she's worried about you, Ellie told Cara once Cara finally looked at her.

We should go. Contrary to her words, Cara didn't move to leave but continued to stare at the grave in front of her. Ellie gave her another couple of minutes before rubbing her back in comfort and gesturing her head toward her car. Cara's eyes stayed locked onto the grave as she turned to follow Ellie to the car.

Cara knew that as soon as she saw her mom, Cara would collapse into her arms. She had been dreading doing so in front of the crowd of people congregated at her house, but she couldn't be away from her mom any longer. Cara had always been close to her dad, but she was even closer to her mom. She considered her mom as much of a friend as a parent. They fought sometimes, more so than Cara ever fought with her dad, but Cara

knew it was because her mom constantly worried about Cara and her place in the world. Now, Cara didn't even know if she had a place in the world. She had lost one of her cheerleaders. Maybe one day she could find her place and feel comfortable as herself. For now, though, she only wanted to go home, grab a Yoo-Hoo, snuggle with Mae, and rip up every single college information packet her dad had requested for her, regardless of her mom's thoughts on the matter. After that, she then planned on spending an evening of sampling casseroles and watching *Once Upon a Time* reruns with her mom and Ellie.

Domicile

Cara, please. Cara's mother grasped one of Cara's hands in both of her own, leaning in toward her to keep her attention as Cara tried to pull away.

I said no, mom. It would just be a waste of money. Cara was crying, but she couldn't remember when it began – maybe when her mom had once again brought up the idea of using the inheritance her father had left her. The money still felt like Cara's last real link to her father after he died in a car accident almost a year ago; it signified all of the things she would never receive from him now. A letter he had written to her told her to use it on something special, but an impromptu trip to Europe wasn't really special enough, was it? She hadn't had the desire to travel again since she lost her travel buddy anyway.

Ellie stood in a corner by the lamp that was the only light in the room. The curtains were closed, and the TV had been turned off half an hour ago in anticipation of bedtime. Finals were next week, so Ellie had come over to study and spend the night. Cara could see Ellie physically holding herself back from saying anything, probably in an attempt not to make Cara even more upset. Cara slowly pulled her hand from her mom's grip and placed it on the worn upholstery of the sofa they were both perched on as if at any moment they might spring up and run away from their emotions.

Your father knew how much you always wanted to travel. He would want you to be happy. He would want you to get away for a while and think. You need to seriously

think about your future. Cara's mother visibly sighed. If one looked closely enough, they could see the pain just below the surface of her pleading expression. The death of Leslie's husband took a greater toll on her than even Cara realized. If she couldn't have her husband back, she would do her hardest to help her daughter. Cara felt she would never be able to attend college or pursue an actual career, but Leslie knew that she could do both if she just had a chance to see that there are more doors open for her than she thought. Leslie looked back at Ellie, hoping for some backup in her argument. In response to Leslie's desperate look, Ellie slowly crept forward to kneel in front of Cara.

Cara, I made a travel plan for us and it wouldn't cost even half of what your dad left. I know the money means a lot to you, but please think about it. You know he would want the best for you, no matter what you decide that is. Traveling may help you decide what you want, though. Cara looked deeply into Ellie's eyes. Cara knew her mom and Ellie were making sense, but she didn't know if she could bring herself to actually do it. Not only was parting with the money a big step for her, but the thought of traveling that far away from home without her father like she'd always planned scared her to bits.

I will think about it, Cara conceded. Her mother's face split into a smile and she lunged forward to grab Cara into a hug. Cara awkwardly patted her mother's back with the little arm movement she had from her position in the hug. When her mom was done hugging Cara, Ellie gave Cara a small smile.

Leslie pushed herself up from the sofa and stretched her arms above her head. *Goodnight, you two.* She gave both girls kisses on the top of their heads and walked out of the room. Cara and Ellie followed after her, turning the living room light off.

As she lay in bed that night waiting for sleep to catch up to her, Cara's mind ran over the travel plan Ellie had excitedly showed her and ticked off lists made of pros and cons. The idea was becoming more appealing, but she was still absolutely terrified. The only thing that was stopping Cara from entirely tossing the idea was that Ellie would be her travel companion. Ellie's grandparents lived in England and her parents were a little well off, so the money and thought of travel didn't bother Ellie nearly as much as it did Cara. Cara knew, too, that she could trust her best friend to make sure everything went okay during the trip. Even with the thought that she would actually be able to travel, Cara still wasn't quite sure. It would take a lot of courage and healing for her to be able to take that step.

Hartsfield-Jackson

You have your boarding pass? Snacks for the flight? A charging bank for your phone? Cara's mom nervously fluttered around her.

Mom, yes. Stop. You're making me even more nervous than I already am.

Sorry, sorry. Leslie whipped around to face Ellie. *You better take care of my baby.* Cara ducked her head in embarrassment as Ellie cracked a smile.

I promise, Mrs. Grimshaw. Ellie's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Akers, pulled her into a quick last hug before pushing her off to the security line. Cara's mom continued to try to plant kisses all over her face even as she pulled away to join Ellie in line.

Cara tried not to look back as she moved through the line, but she couldn't help glancing back at her mom and her tear-stained face. Anxiety bubbled up in Cara's stomach, making her feel like she was going to vomit, pee, and faint all at the same time. She had felt like this to some degree ever since she had decided that she had moped around long enough and that she should accept Ellie's offer to go on a backpacking trip together. Still, her heart felt like a rock and her stomach felt like a colony of angry bees had taken residence in it. Somehow sensing this, Ellie looped her arm around Cara's. The presence of another person made her feel calmer and more grounded. Moments later, though, the anxiety poured over her again, making her head swim and her heart pound. She had wanted to travel for so long, but now that she was on the cusp of doing so, it all seemed too impossible. Even the thought of having her childhood friend and closest

companion Ellie alongside her couldn't calm the ferocious thoughts of panic and the overwhelming feelings of *too much*. What if the plane fell from the sky? What if none of their reservations were made successfully? What if the adventure didn't live up to Cara's imaginings? What if —

The lady at the security podium beckoned Ellie and Cara forward, interrupting Cara's internal panicking. Ellie handed the woman their passports and boarding passes and exchanged some words with her. The woman smiled at both girls, handed their things back to Ellie, and waved them through to the checkpoint line. The line was miraculously moving rapidly, so Cara and Ellie needed only slip off their shoes and jackets and wait a couple of minutes before being led through the x-ray machine one at a time. Cara felt like the whole process was a bit overdone; it was all so chaotic yet abnormally strict and logically proactive while being completely ludicrous.

As soon as they retrieved their items from the conveyor belt and made sure everything was back in its place, Ellie hurried to the departure screen to make sure their plane was on time and at the same gate.

Cara found the correct flight first, and the two girls made their way to the proper terminal, which was a much longer walk than either of them would have preferred. When they finally made it to their terminal and then found the gate for their flight, Cara realized her stomach felt like a cavern. The Atlanta airport was the closest international airport to their house, but they still lived an hour or so away from it, so they had had to leave very early to get to the airport at a reasonable time before their flight was scheduled to board. Also, even though she had had something substantial to eat for breakfast with her mom,

that was before checking again that everything was packed, waiting for Ellie to arrive in order to carpool, making the drive to the airport, waiting to get their bags checked, going through security, and then walking to their gate. A big amount of time had passed since her last meal and, anyway, her nervousness made her hungry if only for the sake of doing something other than staring at the gate's screen displaying their flight and departure information for the next hour. After looking around, Ellie suggested just grabbing something from a snack bar they kept eyeing. The snack bar didn't have an eating area, so the two ended up back at the gate, sitting in the corner and savoring their last bite of America for a while. Cara had a little difficulty swallowing around her heart in her throat, though. She took a break from eating to turn to her travel expert friend. Ellie's grandparents lived in England, so she had traveled to visit them a bit for holidays; that was actually the two's first travel stop, too.

Traveling is supposed to be fun. Where's the fun in sweaty palms and your stomach being turned inside out? I'm incredibly nervous, Cara admitted to Ellie.

Just wait until the plane is over the ocean and you look out and realize how big and wide and great the earth is. It's impossible to imagine anything being worth worrying over when the cabin is dark and there's only the sound of the engines flying you over the wide blue ocean, Ellie responded, a far-off look in her eye. When Ellie stopped talking, she smiled at Cara, and somehow, even though Cara couldn't quite picture it, she believed Ellie enough that she was able to finish her wrap without her nerves devouring her instead.

After she finished her wrap, Cara stared out the window at the gate. It was early, so the sun wasn't too terribly high in the sky yet. They had chosen an early flight because, with the almost nine-hour flight plus the time difference, they wanted to get there with enough time for Ellie's grandparents to drive them back to their house before it was too late in the day. Time seemed to pass too quickly while Cara was engrossed in watching the planes come and go with Ellie sitting beside her listening to music. Before she even knew it, the time had come for them to begin boarding the plane.

They had to wait a little for their zone to get called, but Cara held her passport and boarding pass tightly in her hands while they did. The time had finally arrived; she was going to travel and see all of the sites she had dreamed of seeing since she was a child.

The seats on the plane weren't as comfortable as she'd hoped for the long flight, but they had a pretty impressive entertainment system filled with all kinds of movies she had been wanting to see but hadn't been able to in the theaters.

Two movies later, Cara lifted the window's screen and peered out. Looking at the ocean far below them and the horizon stretching out in the distance, Cara knew exactly what Ellie had been talking about, and her remaining nerves dissolved into a sense of awe and anticipation.

The Old Smoke

Cara had not slept a wink. Everyone around her, including Ellie, had fallen asleep in the dark cabin at least for a little bit, but Cara had found it impossible. She really did try. She closed her eyes and shifted in her seat for at least a half hour or so before the feeling of ants crawling around in her skin forced her eyes open and prompted her to dive into yet another movie. The excitement upon landing further wiped any thought of sleep from her mind. London Heathrow was just another large airport, but it felt magical. The winding and never-ending hallways just to get to the arrival area felt like a glorious maze with a prize at the exit. Ellie had to keep stopping Cara from skipping ahead and getting lost in the crowd.

When the two finally reached Ellie's grandparents, Cara's first thought was that they were adorable. They both only came up to Cara's chin and were holding hands when the girls came around the corner. Roger, Ellie's grandfather, was wearing a cute little hat and had a walking cane with a duck carved into the top. Francine, Ellie's grandmother, was completely color coordinated and cheery in a flowery top, lilac pants, and a necklace made out of painted ceramic beads. They both had white hair and crinkles around their eyes from laughing, and Roger had dimples that were visible even when he wasn't smiling.

After Francine fussed over Ellie and Cara and asked them about their flight, Roger suggested they make their way to the car. He was smiling endearingly at his wife,

but Cara could tell he was tired and wanted to get home. The ride there was filled with Ellie catching up with her grandparents and Cara absorbing the passing scenery.

They passed a field filled with sheep, which caused a wide grin to light up Cara's face. The scenery became less city-like and more country-like, but Cara didn't care where she was so long as it was England. Ellie's grandparents used to live in London, but Roger had decided he wanted somewhere quieter, so the two had moved out to the college town of Leicester. Just as it had been in London, it was quite pricey to live in Leicester, but they loved the feel of the town and the fact that it was still a city even though it wasn't as large as London was. They lived in a little flat toward the center of Leicester, though they weren't too close to the university's campus.

The sky was slightly overcast, and the weather was slightly rainy – spitting, Francine called it – but Cara felt she had never seen prettier skies. She felt that if she stayed outside long enough that she might get soaked, but she couldn't help standing outside with her arms outstretched, looking up at the English sky. The sun had set already, so Cara couldn't see around too well, but even just the feel of the air made her acutely aware of the fact that she was far from home. It made her feel like she was capable of anything.

Pretty soon Cara began to feel damp, so she hurried inside to join Ellie, Francine, and Roger. Roger was brewing tea and Francine was dishing out a stew from a slow cooker. Both of them smiled at Cara and waved her to the dining table set in a little room to the right of the kitchen. There were a quaint little living room with a TV, small sofa, and bookshelves to the front left of the house.

A hallway with a coat rack led from the front door to the kitchen, with a hallway branching off to the right containing doors, presumably leading to the bedrooms and bathroom. Ellie had told Cara that the two would be sharing one of the two bedrooms of the house. The decor seemed to follow a dull coral color theme, which Cara found calming and pleasant.

As Roger brought Cara her cup of tea, Ellie came into the dining room. She explained to Cara that she had put their bags in their room but left Cara the choice of bed. Dinner sped by because Cara quickly devoured her delicious serving of stew, and she soon realized that she was a lot sleepier than she had previously thought. She still felt abuzz, but her eyelids were starting to droop after the exhaustion of flying and traveling all day. Somehow, she found the table cleared and herself being gently guided to Ellie and her room. Cara got ready for bed before collapsing onto the bed on the right side of the room.

She stared at the room's bookshelf while Ellie finished getting for bed and saying *goodnight* to her grandparents. The shelf was old and absolutely filled with old books. A couple of the books looked newer, but the majority of them looked like they had been read countless times, judging by the state of the spines. Cara's eyes kept drifting to one specific book with a worn leather cover. It had no visible title, but the spine showed evidence that it had definitely been used. Cara made a mental note to get the book off of the shelf tomorrow and see what it was about. She enjoyed reading books quite a lot, though most people her age tended to gravitate toward TV shows. She especially loved older books because of the history she felt was attached to them. One of Cara's favorite

books was an old and well-read copy of *Wuthering Heights* she had found at a used book store. She had even brought the copy with her in case she had a chance to read while traveling from place to place. However, maybe Francine would let her borrow the old book on the shelf to read during the long bus drives and flights. With that thought, Cara couldn't keep her eyes open any longer, and she faded off to sleep, excitement for the next day simmering in her stomach.

~*~

Leicester didn't have too terribly much to sightsee, but that didn't stop Ellie and Cara. Cara dragged Ellie to the little museum near the city's university. There, Cara bought her first souvenir: a little stone egg keychain. The two then spent some time roaming and sitting in the park. Afterwards, because he had taught at the University of Leicester before his retirement, Roger gave Cara and Ellie a short tour of the campus. He paused to point out various locations, such as an astronomical clock and a tall building called Attenborough Tower. They went through a connected adjacent building in order to get into Attenborough. Once inside, Cara discovered the wonder of the Paternoster lift. Once she got over her initial nervousness at the strange invention – and had witnessed Ellie safely travel in it – Cara found immense joy in riding the Paternoster. The Paternoster was essentially an elevator that kept going around on a continuous loop from the bottom of the building to the top and back again in a steady stream of compartments. Roger limited Cara and Ellie to only taking the lift on one complete journey because *it's not a ride*, but Cara thought it was a lovely invention and couldn't stop smiling afterwards.

Roger had some old colleagues he had plans to meet up with, so he left Ellie and Cara at the Students' Union and told them he'd be back in an hour to take them to meet up with Francine for further exploring of Leicester. The main part of the Union was large and open, with windows in the ceiling as well as functioning as part of the walls. The second floor had a walkway all the way around its perimeter. Toward where they walked in sat a crepe cart, unfortunately closed at the moment. To their left, something called the Union St. Food Market had different food stands and a small market. Outside of the market and to the right was a Starbucks; Cara pointed it out to Ellie and they smiled at how there seemed to be a Starbucks no matter where one goes. In the center of the room, people occupied various tables, chairs, and couches. To the right of where Cara and Ellie had paused to take the room in was a Union Diner. After deciding to avoid the busy market area, Ellie and Cara headed to the diner to get lunch with some money Roger given them.

While waiting for their food, Ellie told Cara how Roger had said that there was an event room that was basically a club downstairs. It was closed, so they wouldn't be able to check it out, but Cara was jealous that the University of Leicester students had their very own club that they could party and hang out in during the evenings. As they were eating, Cara took advantage of the moment of calm and the internet she had access to in the Union and quickly exchanged some messages with her mom about Ellie and her safe arrival and their tour of Leicester so far. Cara had anticipated not being able to communicate with her mom too much while traveling, so she was grateful for the brief opportunity to do so.

After Roger located Ellie and Cara, they caught a bus and headed downtown to meet up with Francine. Francine, Ellie, and Cara left Roger at the Five Guys and went to check out the many stores in the area. Cara and Ellie shopped and ended up buying a few cute tops and some trinkets. Cara was most proud of a hat she had found that had a beard sewn onto it so that it looked like she was wearing a knit beard and mustache when she wore it. They shopped until they felt guilty for leaving Roger to sit by himself for so long. The four then took the bus back and went grocery shopping at ASDA, a store that was similar to Walmart but seemed much better because it was full of English novelties.

While there, Cara loaded up on Cadbury yogurts, banana flavored milk, digestive biscuits, and a box of oatmeal in a flavor she didn't know even existed. She had no idea how she was going to eat it all before they left Ellie's grandparents in two days, but she was too excited to care. The novelty of everything around the city and at the different places she had seen had her taking note of every little thing and taking so many pictures that she felt she was doing more picture taking than actual sightseeing.

Cara's first full day in England, therefore, was filled with adventure, but her second day, however, she spent with her nose in a book. She had forgotten about the old little book on the shelf that had fascinated her the night before but was reminded of it after returning to the house from ASDA. She had Ellie quickly ask her grandparents if Cara could read it and then skipped happily to the shelf when they said she absolutely could. The old book turned out to be a journal from one of Ellie's relatives long ago. Francine had meant to clean off the shelf and get rid of the books ages ago but had never gotten to the task. Cara had an acute love for history and was fascinated by the ancestor's

thoughts and feelings. She was even more intrigued by the fact that the journal stopped suddenly with only seven blank pages left. The journal had no dates, which Cara found perplexing, but Roger suggested it was from either the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The journal had been passed from child to child through the years, but no one had really cared to pay too much attention to such a boring possession. Luckily for the Akers, Cara was more than interested. She spent much too long on her second day in Leicester beginning to read and understand the writing while Ellie played card games with her grandparents. Cara was able to learn that the author was an Englishman named Gregory who was traveling to Florence for business. She decided she definitely wanted to bring the book with her to read during her travels.

Cara and Ellie's third day brought them an afternoon bus back to London. The girls planned on spending five days there before moving on to a different city and country. Ellie was going to miss her grandparents, but she would be coming back to stay with them for a couple of weeks after Cara and her travels throughout Europe were done. The two would part ways after visiting Florence for a couple of days. That meant that Ellie only had about a month and a half before she would get to see Francine and Roger again, so she only gave them two long hugs before leaving rather than her customary four each. Ellie spent the bus ride listening to music while Cara spent it alternating between napping and staring intently out the window at the passing scenery. Before either of them knew it, they were in the heart of London.

Cara dragged her suitcase along behind her and looked around while Ellie guided her to their hostel via the pre-downloaded map and directions on her phone. The two had

decided on staying in nice hostels rather than throwing money out the window by staying in overpriced hotels. Some of their hostels would even be offering free breakfast, which Cara knew she would appreciate, especially later in the trip after she spent money on souvenirs in each city.

The weather was overcast again, but it somehow fit the feel of the city. If Cara thought New York City was incredible, she didn't have a word that could come close to describing how much she enjoyed London, and she hadn't even properly seen it yet!

Their first stop was Big Ben. It stood proudly in the air on a busy street corner. The hazy sky didn't allow for high quality pictures, but Cara wanted to document the fact that she had actually seen the tower in person. She almost got hit by a car, though, because she was standing in its way and didn't realize that she had slowly walked her way into the street. Ellie barely managed to pull her out of its way before she caused too much traffic mayhem or managed to get hit by one of the cars heading toward the bridge.

You need to make sure you watch where you're going. I may not be close by next time! Ellie chastised her.

I'm sorry. I know. It's just—

The tower. It's beautiful. I get it.

Cara felt awful because she had already caused a problem, and a cloud formed over her head, darkening her mood slightly as the two started getting more acquainted with London. She couldn't help that she didn't hear the car, but the whole situation made her feel like a burden to Ellie.

After seeing Big Ben, Cara and Ellie walked down to Westminster Abbey since they were in the area. They didn't stay too long because they didn't want to pay to go in, but Ellie thought the architecture was gorgeous. She especially loved the designs of the windows. On the walk from the abbey to the London Eye, their ultimate destination, Cara paused to look at a sundial on the ground with an inscription around it. The dial indicated it was a quote from Shakespeare's *Henry VI*. The quote began, *To carve out Dials quaintly point by point Thereby to see the Minutes how they run* and ended with, *how many Years a Mortal man may live*. Reading the quote and being at the beginning of her trip of a lifetime put into perspective for Cara the preciousness of each minute and the value of every experience. Ellie was hurrying her on so that they wouldn't be at the London Eye too late, so Cara snapped a quick picture to help her remember the quote and the emotions it evoked before catching up to Ellie.

The line for the London eye was rather long, but it seemed to be moving pretty quickly. Cara and Ellie spent time admiring the decorations in the awning and discussing their plans for the next day. They were also thankful for the shelter from the rain; it hadn't picked up any, but it was a constant drizzle that left a film of water on glass ceiling that was the roof over their heads. Once they got on, the capsule began its slow ascent to the top of the wheel. Some people sat down, but Cara and Ellie excitedly remained standing and looking out the glass walls at the city. Ellie got the little computer to work and the two looked up the different buildings visible to them from their vantage point. From up high, Cara was able to get better pictures of Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster.

After riding the London Eye, Cara and Ellie made their way to Madame Tussauds, somewhere Ellie had been wanting to go since she heard that they had put One Direction wax figures in the museum. The lifelikeness of all of the figures both spooked and awed the two. Cara immediately begged Ellie for a picture with Emma Watson. Later, Cara tried her hardest to pose regally with the Royal Family and was grateful that Ellie got a good picture of her. When they got to the Marvel section and its short film, Cara hurried through and waited for Ellie on the other side. By the time they were done at Madame Tussauds, both girls were ready to call it a day.

The next day, Cara pulled Ellie out of bed early in order to head for Buckingham Palace. She had heard so much about it over the years and couldn't wait to finally see it for herself. They unfortunately missed the changing of the guard and weren't able to go back to see it during their remaining time in London. They did, however, take a bus out to Hanbury Street to do their own little Jack the Ripper tour. They somehow ended up at the Tower of London and decided to go there a bit earlier than planned. Cara found the structure and history absolutely enthralling. She was a tad amused by the lion figures meant to demonstrate the past dangers of trying to enter the tower uninvited. Leaving the tower led them to Tower Bridge. Cara had always been under the impression that London Bridge was the major bridge in London because of the name and the song about it, so she was surprised to learn that Tower Bridge was the main one and London Bridge was a secondary smaller one a little bit down the river. In comparison the Tower Bridge, London Bridge was actually just a sad little bridge with a sign or two next to it. On their walk, Cara came across another saying she found significant on an advertisement on a

wall. It said, *One day, the road didn't really have any crossing, you just had to cross the road.*

She pointed it out to Ellie and said, *Sometimes you have to take chances and make your own path.* Ellie smiled at this.

Like you did coming on this trip? Are you doing okay so far? It took Cara a moment to think. She remembered almost getting hit by a car and not being able to enjoy some of the things they'd seen as much as Ellie had, but she also remembered how incredible the sights had been and how much more she had to look forward to seeing. She ignored the pestering thought at the back of her mind that told her she wished her dad were with her; she always felt that way, and what she needed to focus on was that she was doing and seeing incredible things with her best friend and that she was having fun doing so.

Yeah, she answered, *I'm glad we're doing this.*

Cara and Ellie were able to visit the gift shop in Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, though actually seeing a play in it would have been so much better. Later, after more walking, the two went to Nando's. While in London, they ate every dinner and almost all of their lunches at Nando's. The food was overpriced and not the healthiest, but they loved it anyway and felt that dining there was a London requirement they couldn't pass up; they wanted to make the most of their trip and do as much as they could in the short time that they were there. To further do this, they saw Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus, Chinatown, Hyde Park, Kensington Palace, the British Museum, and the Natural History Museum. They even made a trip out to the Making of Harry Potter studio tour;

Cara's favorite part of that tour was seeing the animated Buckbeak. By the end of their time in London, they felt they had seen and done everything they possibly could in the short time that they had. The two felt more than ready to hop on their bus to Edinburgh when the time came, though they would both miss the wonders of London. Cara was hoping for a less busy city where she wouldn't have to constantly be on the lookout for people and cars.

Auld Reekie and Dear Green Place

They only had two days in Edinburgh before they were scheduled to leave for Glasgow, so they didn't have too much of an opportunity to explore the city. After arriving in Edinburgh, they spent the day walking around by the shops. Cara and Ellie took a peek at a clothing store called Primark and decided that they loved it. Primark had really cute clothes for exceptional prices. Cara bought a nice little Scotland tote and decided to put her purchased souvenirs in it.

Ellie made a beeline for Calton Hill. She'd heard it was a good place to see some landmarks. From the hill, there was a phenomenal view of the city. Cara and Ellie could practically see Edinburgh in its entirety from up that high. When the two got done viewing the city from one side of the hill, they walked over the other side. They then climbed up the massive steps of the National Monument, an incomplete landmark inspired by the Parthenon. They also got a view of the Nelson Monument. The two lingered to take in the sites and enjoy the beautiful weather. Cara and Ellie were tempted to join the people who lay out in the sun on the grassy hill, but they decided to journey back down to check out the Royal Mile. They saw a man in Highland Dress playing the bagpipes and stopped a little bit down the street to watch him play. They also encountered a magic show in the middle of the walkway. After watching him work for a while, Cara was convinced to buy something from a man who was spray painting fantastic pieces of art on the side of the street. By the time they had stopped wandering,

the two had missed all of the free tours of the day but decided to return the next day to participate in one. Cara just wanted the guide to show her the different sights without getting lost somewhere, which she knew she would end up doing if left to her own devices.

During their tour, they were shown many highlights of Edinburgh. Some of Cara's favorites included the grave of Thomas Riddell who inspired J.K. Rowling's Tom Riddle, supposedly haunted graves accompanied by ghost stories, and the site of the last public execution in Edinburgh; Ellie had made sure to point all of these things out to her. Cara wished she could do an additional tour of the Edinburgh Vaults, but she knew that the only thing she would gain from it would be a scary walk through the dark. When their walking tour of the city ended, they quickly walked away after being guilted for not tipping the tour guide and decided to check out Edinburgh Castle. The climb up the hill to the castle was awful, but it was worth it for the view and the experience. Cara was enamored by the Stone of Destiny and its history even more than she was by the Crown Jewels. She was amazed by the fact that the stone had been taken by the English way back in 1296 and that it took up until 1996 for the stone to be returned to Scotland. By the time Cara and Ellie were done touring the castle, it was closing time as well as time for them to grab dinner and wander back to their hostel. They had barely even scratched the surface of the incredible history of Edinburgh, but they had made sure to see as many of the sites as they could. Anyway, Ellie was more excited to check out Glasgow, historical Edinburgh's modern counterpart. She wasn't as fascinated in the histories of the cities they went as Cara was and mainly just wanted to see new places.

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Because Ellie had heard that Glasgow had a botanic garden and wanted to check it out because she loved big, beautiful gardens, the two took a bus there right after they got checked into and settled in at their hostel. The Glasgow Botanic Gardens did not disappoint. The gardens were full of a myriad of different plants and flowers. Cara and Ellie ducked into the Kibble Palace first. The air was humid because of the environment necessary for the plants to thrive. While Ellie took her time walking around the main room and taking note of the different plants, Cara focused on the statues set around the perimeter of the room. Her favorite one was titled “Stepping Stones.” Cara spent so long admiring the artistry of the girl’s marble toes gripping the edge of a stone as she takes a precautious step forward that by the time Cara got done with that and looked briefly at the other statues, Ellie was waiting impatiently at the front of the greenhouse. The next greenhouse they went into had a few little white plaques with quotes written on them that Cara found fascinating. When they got done there and had a chance to walk around the garden’s path, the two stumbled upon a little tearoom at the back of the garden. Cara, in an attempt to be British-like, ordered a tea and a scone with clotted cream and jam. She had never tasted anything so delicious. The tea came in a little kettle and was accompanied by a tiny saucer of milk. She was quick to admit that she probably wouldn’t enjoy the scone without the very sweet cream and jam, though, because she had never been one for American biscuits, which was what the scone practically was. She learned by trial and error that adding the cream before the jam is the best way to construct

a proper scone as doing so made it easier to get both the ingredients onto the scone and made the scone itself taste slightly better.

Walking down the street away from the botanical garden, Ellie and Cara saw the most beautiful sky they had ever seen: a gorgeous shade of blue with brilliantly white fluffy clouds. They stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to take pictures of it and document it forever. Their walk led them to the University of Glasgow. The older building made the girls pause and hold their breath. They felt like they had somehow fallen back in time. Cara was slightly amused by the Wellington Church close to the university's visitor center because the church looked like it belonged in Ancient Greece or next to the Pantheon rather than nestled into Glasgow, Scotland.

The two continued their walk and found themselves at a massive park. They had just decided they wanted to wander through it when they noticed that there was a man playing fetch with his dog, a Collie, up on the hill. Cara and Ellie found a memorial fountain in the middle of the park. While they were admiring the artwork and designs on the fountain, it suddenly began to pour with rain. Cara gazed up at the sky in astonishment, and Ellie fumbled to get her umbrella out.

What on Earth? Cara asked, a laugh bubbling up inside her from the randomness of the rain.

I have no clue! I didn't see it coming. Get under here. Ellie waved at Cara to get under the umbrella. As Cara reached her, it began to hail as well.

I have no idea what is happening, but okay. Cara smiled in alarm and humor and glanced back up at the sunny sky hailing and raining down on them.

Do you want to just call it a day and head back to the hostel? Ellie asked, and she began walking back the way they came. By the time they made it to the exit that would lead them to the Subway, the storm had completely passed.

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The next day, they headed to the People's Palace. They encountered a children's art show at the front of the palace's garden area. Cara wished she could purchase one of paintings because the children were immensely talented, but she knew it would never make it home safely if she tried to keep it in her bag.

Cara hadn't known what to expect of the People's Palace, but she was surprised to find it was a little museum. Cara clutched her chest as she read about Private James Riley in the World War I section. Private Riley's life was saved by a German drill book and a shaving mirror he had had in his pocket when he was shot by a German soldier. His luck astounded Cara, and she pointed out the display to Ellie. On the topmost floor was another display of artwork. Cara wished she could take a picture even close to the magnificence of the ones she saw there. Some of the pictures of nature looked so lifelike that she felt she could reach her hand into them and appear on the other side in the actual location.

On their slow walk around the area, Ellie and Cara came across a police box that was almost identical to *Dr. Who's* TARDIS. Cara snapped a picture and stared intently at it in case the Doctor popped out. Unfortunately, it was just an old police box lacking any real time machine properties. The two did, however, come across an ALDI, which Cara was surprised to see even though she had known they existed outside of the States. It was

a day of fascinating things. In the evening, the two journeyed back out to the area of the university to a little lane they had discovered the previous day. In the night, the lane was lit up with a ceiling of hanging lights, making it appear even more magical than it had seemed in the daylight. Cara and Ellie popped in to the cinema they had discovered and watched a movie they had both been wanting to see but had been unable to since it came out. They thought it was kind of silly to be going to a cinema when they were meant to be sightseeing, but they couldn't resist the temptation. Ellie wanted to see the movie, and Cara wanted the experience of going to a movie theater in a different country. Without subtitles, Cara didn't really have any idea of what was going on in the movie, but she was too happy with how the day had gone and with the knowledge that they would be going on a tour tomorrow to let this fact bring her down.

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Both Cara and Ellie were decidedly against early mornings. Even with the cold air waking them up more, the two wanted nothing more than to be back in bed. It was too cold and dark to be active, but the departure time for their tour was early so as to get everything done; the day's itinerary required lots of driving and traveling. Luckily, the tour guide/bus driver was quite a good driver and played nice music, so the two, along with the other passengers in the van, dozed off to sleep here and there until they reached their first stop. The first stop wasn't much beyond a bathroom and maybe food stop: it was a stone house in the middle of nowhere. The view from the yard was as gorgeous as the scenery they had been passing. Mountains were off in the distance and rolling hills covered with trees and bushes. The greenness of the grass was sometimes diminished by

some brown colored grass or patches of trees without leaves, but it fit the feeling of the Scottish wilderness. The van kept stopping for what Cara thought of as *nature stops*. The driver wanted to give them all opportunities to take pictures of the land and see it outside of the lens of the tinted windows. Ellie was sleeping when they first came into view, but the snow-capped mountains in the distance excited Cara when she saw them. She took picture after picture of the passing scenery.

Around the time it was a decent enough hour for everyone to be awake, the guide made a surprise stop. Cara excitedly pressed her nose to the glass window as the van pulled up to a herd of deer. Ellie was the first one up and out of her seat to get off the van and get closer to the deer. The guide handed out carrots from a bag he materialized from the front of the van. Cara couldn't keep the smile off her face as the deer she chose as her own to feed yanked a carrot from her hand and took it a little distance away to eat it in peace. Some of the deer steadfastly refused to eat a carrot if it was attached to a human, so Cara started placing them on the ground and walking away to watch while the deer approached the abandoned offering. Neither Cara nor Ellie wanted to leave the deer, but the guide eventually ran out of carrots and said they needed to get back on the road.

They made two more stops before reaching their ultimate destination. They stopped at a memorial area with a statue and garden dedicated to those who died in World War II. It put a damper on the happiness from feeding the deer, but Cara knew it was just as important to learn the history of the country as it was to enjoy the scenery. Cara and Ellie separated from the group slightly and spent a moment in the garden surrounded by a ring of plaques and items left for those who had been lost. After some more time in the

van, they stopped once again to feed some precious Scottish animals, this time Highland Cows, one a mom cow and the other a baby cow. They had shaggy hair and were adorable when they tilted their heads and widened their eyes in order to look at the carrots and those feeding them. The baby cow kept trying to lick Cara's hand, repeatedly side-eyeing Cara to see if she had any carrots left. Cara found that both cows enjoyed being patted on their muzzles. She knew her dad would have loved them as cows had been his favorite animal.

It was the afternoon already by the time they made it to their ultimate destination: Loch Ness. They stopped at Fort Augustus where they took pictures with a sign for the lake. Cara kept peering out into the distance to see if she could see any heads popping up out of the water. Next, they went to Urquhart Castle. They spent some time in the gift shop where Cara tried on a Highland Cow hat and Ellie looked at the Outlander souvenirs. They realized they were wasting precious time, though, and hurried outside to see the castle before the ferry for the lake tour arrived. The structure of the castle barely existed anymore, so the signs posted in each section of what remained were immensely useful. Cara climbed up to the top of the castle to get a view of the whole structure and the lake from up high. She wished she could go back in time and see the castle in all its glory. She thought it was incredible how experts could determine and describe the type and function of the different pieces that made up the ruins. She admired the open spaces, some of which had stone wall bases and partial door frames that were once part of a magnificent castle one of the signs deemed *the largest medieval castle in Highland Scotland*.

The ferry soon came, and Cara and Ellie quickly boarded and went to the upper deck. The boat was slow at first, but it picked up speed slightly as it left the shore behind. The wind was chilly yet incredibly soothing. If she closed her eyes, Cara could almost imagine she was back in time sailing away from the impressive Urquhart Castle in a grand wooden ship, with nothing but the open water ahead to worry about. Opening her eyes, Cara's fantasy slipped away. She still felt at peace, though, on the water that was still except for the waves created by the boat. The shore around the lake reflected the sights she'd seen on the journey there. She thought their various shades of brown and green might be boring and ugly if seen anywhere else. The window of the captain's room at the front of the boat had a tiny little Nessie ornament hanging in it. Cara knew she wouldn't be seeing the infamous Loch Ness Monster, but she couldn't help but wonder if maybe it had existed once upon a time.

After the journey down the lake, the boat dropped its passengers off at a hotel/gift shop outside of which was a *forecasting stone*. The stone sat on the handrail with a sign beneath it listing possible conditions of the stone – such as wet or missing – on one side and correlating weather conditions on the other. Ellie was amused by the fact that the sign claimed that if the stone was missing, it meant Nessie was about. Because they hadn't run into any souvenir shops in the proximity of their hostel, the two girls ducked into the gift shop to browse for Scottish souvenirs before being herded back to the van for the journey back. The van only made one last stop during which Cara and Ellie stretched their legs, and Ellie stopped by an ice cream shop for some locally made ice cream. Before dropping

them off by their hostel, the tour guide drove the van by the iconic statue of the Duke of Wellington, who was fashionably decorated with a traffic cone on his head.

Because of the early start to the busy day they had had, Cara and Ellie were hungry, so they made a stop at a pub right down the street from their hostel before returning to their room and relaxing in their beds until bedtime. Cara took the time to read more of the journal she had gotten from Francine and Roger's house. Gregory, the writer, wrote of the long journey by boat and horse that began at his home in England and ended in Italy. Reading about how long it took him and how awful the journey seemed, Cara was thankful for present day technology and transportation that saved her from such hardships. Gregory spoke of a sister named Isabelle whose wedding he would be missing because he would be unable to return to England until his business in Italy was done, which meant he would be gone for years. He loved his sister dearly and hoped she would be well upon his return. It seemed like he might have had a brother, too, but he did not mention him more than once. Gregory often spoke of the family with which he would be staying once he arrived in Italy. The family was apparently the one with whom his father had business ties. Cara's eyes began closing for sleep before she could get much further in the journal.

Cara and Ellie hadn't had too long in Scotland, but it was time for them to move on to Ireland for a quick tour of the country. Cara's main goals were to see the Cliffs of Moher and to, well, *see the Cliffs of Moher*. She couldn't believe she was finally getting a chance to do so. Being able to stay in Dublin *and* see the cliffs felt to her as magical as standing in front of Buckingham Palace, and she wasn't even there yet. Even though

tomorrow meant another early morning in order to make it to the airport, Cara didn't seem to mind one bit.

The Fair City

Their hostel in Dublin was next to the most amazing little place called The Bachelor Inn. The inn's outside walls were entirely painted with quotes from poets. Cara related to the quote by Ronnie Drew that said, *I feel I must have a talent for doing something but I'm still not terribly sure what it is*. She knew there had to be something she could do, but she couldn't imagine actually being successful or good at a career. She imagined she'd probably never make it in any field. She was smart and had made great grades all through high school, but that was with a lot of accommodation. She knew she wouldn't be able to rely on special accommodations forever.

Because it was close to their hostel, Ellie and Cara decided to check out Trinity College and the surrounding area. When the two got there, they saw a lot of people walking around and checking out the college just like they were. While Ellie took a peek at the courtyard and the buildings surrounding it, Cara admired the bell tower that was straight ahead of the main entrance. When she got back to where Cara was standing and noticed her staring at it, Ellie's face split into a grin.

Apparently if a student walks under it when the bell tolls, they fail their exams.

What? Where did you find that out? Cara looked at Ellie in confusion.

Superstition! There's a tour and the guide said it.

Oh! I just like the cross at the top. The design makes little hearts. Cara shared a close-up picture of the cross she took with Ellie. *See?* Ellie smiled and nodded her head in agreement.

I like the trees. They're such a vibrant green. It was Cara's turn to nod in agreement with Ellie.

They started walking to view some more of the college and, when they rounded the corner to the right, they found the library containing the Book of Kells. After a small debate, Cara's argument to go see it won out over Ellie's desire to meander around the campus.

The wait in line was rather long, but Cara's excitement over seeing the old text kept her from getting bored. When they made it in, Cara's breath was taken away. The library was gorgeous and big, and the texts were absolutely fascinating. Cara made note of the fact that she could go online later to view the book in more detail on the digital collections. She could have stayed there staring at the pages for days, but she was only able to stay for a little bit before Ellie got bored and Cara's eyes began to burn from staring intently at the pages.

After leaving the library and looking around the campus a bit more, the two came across a globe sculpture that they both found fascinating as it was bronze colored and seemed entirely random but looked really cool. It was like the earth was splitting open and the gears and center within were becoming visible. They circled around the sculpture for a couple of minutes trying to understand it more, but they finally just settled on enjoying the structure for being the intriguing object that it was.

Cara admired the architecture of the Bank of Ireland across the way from Trinity College. She had only looked at it out of the corner of her eye on the way to the college, but she found the columns on the building to be impressive. Cara and Ellie only briefly considered finding and going to the Leprechaun Museum advertised by a street sign before laughing off the idea. Walking back to the area of their hostel led them back across the river. Rather than hurrying past it like they did the first time, the two paused in the middle to lean on the bridge and look out over the water. The sun reflected on the river, making the water sparkle and glisten. The clouds were fluffy and brilliantly white. Even though the sun was no longer high overhead, Cara had to squint her eyes a little against the brightness of it all.

In an attempt to wind down for the day and decompress, Cara and Ellie sought out the hammock room of their hostel. The design of the walls in the room, almost like a colorful bleeding of pen ink on wet paper or like colored dyes dripped into water, was more comforting than Cara imagined it would be. She wrapped herself in the cocoon of the hammock and imagined she was shut off from the world without a care. Maybe when she emerged she would be a butterfly able to confidently fly off into the world. That ended up not being the case, but Cara felt very calm by the time Ellie tugged on her hammock to get her to get up.

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Wednesday brought their trip to the Cliffs of Moher. Cara didn't care about anywhere else they ended up traveling to as long as she got her experience with the cliffs, for she had been wanting to see them in person ever since she saw a picture of them in a

travel magazine when she was 8. When the bus made its first pit stop at a gas station, Cara mainly got off just to stretch her legs, but she was beyond glad she did. Inside the store was just a normal convenience store, but it held such treasures. Ellie was incredibly amused by how excited Cara got over her find of a tiny jug of milk. It was 500 milliliters of delicious fresh Irish milk. She also got a scone that was even better than the one she had eaten in Glasgow, but she was more enamored with the jug of milk because she had never before had the experience of drinking milk from a miniature jug.

She hadn't checked the itinerary, so Cara was pleasantly surprised by the stop they made in Galway. The walking tour they were taken on took them right through the main part of the town. Everyone was laughing a lot, so it must have been a good tour with a funny explanation of the town. The church they were shown, St. Nicholas' Collegiate Church, was small and beautiful. Cara felt the small wooden chairs took away from the specialness of the church, but she couldn't really complain too much because it still had a nice open feel. She was tickled pink by a memorial the church had for Jane Eyre. They also passed by statues of Oscar Wilde and Eduard Wilde sitting on a bench with a space in between them. Cara sat down between the statues of the two men and had Ellie take a picture of her.

When they were given a few minutes to walk around, Cara wanted to buy herself a Claddagh Ring, but she knew she would end up forgetting the different meanings of how one wears it and didn't want to embarrass herself by wearing it incorrectly. Ellie ended up purchasing herself one from the *original makers of the Claddagh Ring* and was very pleased.

The hills and lakes they passed by on the journey made the bus ride less boring. The grass was greener than Cara ever thought grass could be. She made a game out of trying to count the number of cows and sheep they passed. They also drove by a lot of churches and old ruins.

The bus also stopped at a pub for a short lunch break. Cara and Ellie both ordered beef stew with a pint of Guinness. The stew was rich and tasty, but Cara's favorite part of her meal was the bread and butter. Ellie decided she did not like Guinness, so Cara, who did like it, drank her portion and finished off Ellie's. Her face felt a little warm as they headed back to the bus.

Don't cross the line and go to the edge of the cliffs, Ellie repeated the stern warning of the bus driver. *You could fall and die*.

Oh was the only thing Cara could answer in response. Even with a newly developed sense of trepidation bubbling in her stomach, Cara rushed off of the bus and toward the path to the cliffs, Ellie struggling to keep up behind her. Cara felt she had never been on a longer walk, but she finally made it to the top. She had decided to go to the right first as it seemed everyone else was going to the left.

The first thing Cara noticed was that she could no longer see because the wind had whipped her hair into her face, covering her eyes just as she reached a spot where she could look out over the cliff. She managed to capture her hair and tie it back with a hair tie she had randomly placed on her wrist that morning. Beside her, Cara noticed Ellie struggling to put her own hair up.

The Cliffs of Moher were everything the pictures she'd seen had depicted and more. The water was still except for tiny waves crashing against the bottom every so often. She could see ridges in the side of the cliffs from years of constant weathering. The sky was magnificently clear. Here, too, the grass was a vivid shade of green. Grass – or moss – was even growing on the side of the cliffs. Cara could see tiny pinpricks of people walking on the path on the other side of the cliff. She couldn't get over how long and massive the cliffs were. She felt like she was on top of the world. It seemed to Cara like the grass and rolling land of Ireland carried on for miles and miles until it just tapered off at the end, at the Cliffs of Moher, and drastically dropped off into an endless sea, stretching toward the horizon and never ending. The water was again sparkling like diamonds in the light. Cara leaned over the stone wall blocking her access to the edge of the cliff and stared down at the sea below.

She looked over to the left at the rest of Ireland beyond and marveled at how endless and great the world seemed. How could mundane life continue when something so magnificent existed *right here*? Other people from her group were exploring the little tower behind her, but Cara couldn't imagine being able to tear herself away from the view of the cliffs long enough to walk further inland. The best she could do was walk slowly back down to the fork in the pathway, keeping her eyes on the cliff so as to keep it ingrained in her memory. She felt that if she took her eyes off of the view for even a second, the magical feeling she felt may never return. Ellie and Cara slowly walked over to the other side of the cliff, the left side where everyone else had gone before. The view from the center was more grass than cliff, but her breath was taken away by the glimpse

of the part of the cliff she had just been standing on top of. No matter the angle, the cliffs were glorious.

From the left side, Cara could see more clearly the wear the cliffs had endured over the years. She imagined she could climb up using the crevices present in the side of the cliffs. It looked like some great giant had taken an ax to the cliffs in a fit of rage or passion, splitting the rock and leaving everlasting scars in the cliffside. She wanted to crawl into one of the giant cracks and stay there with the land forever, never having to return to civilization again.

A look into the horizon showed rain showers creeping over the sea. This sight caused Ellie and Cara's steps to quicken. When they finally reached the other side of the cliff, Ellie and Cara paused to take in the sight before them. From this vantage point, they could see the bottom of the cliff even better. The water immediately surrounding the bottom of the cliff was a lighter shade of turquoise that contrasted with the darker teal of the water further out. Ignoring the sign warning of danger and potential death, Cara and Ellie followed other tourists over a fence to the edge of the cliff. Cara felt fear seize her heart, but the fact that no one had fallen down in front of her just yet calmed her a little. As soon as she sat down on the edge, too, she felt a little safe with the thought that at least she couldn't stumble and fall if she were sitting. After Ellie snapped some quick pictures of her, Cara returned the favor, and they quickly left the edge for the safety of the path. They made it to the gift shop just in time for it to start raining. When the sky had cleared slightly, they ran back to the bus to wait for the other passengers to return. Cara still felt the exhilaration of being at the edge of the cliff as the bus pulled away from the

curb and led her back inland. Cara and Ellie, tired from the rush of adrenaline, dozed slightly until the bus made a surprise stop at another cliff, this one less well known. It was misting, so not all of the passengers disembarked, but Cara and Ellie were still feeling adventurous and curious.

This cliff was much smaller and consisted of rocks filled with holes and cracks. Cara hopped from spot to spot, only feeling slightly scared that she might lose her footing and fall to her death. The rocks lacked any grass or greenery, unless one counted the algae growing on their surfaces, which Cara did not. Leaning over the edge of this cliff, Cara could see the bottom of the water below. The water was again a beautiful shade of teal, with rocks evident just below the surface. A line on the outside of the cliff suggested that the water may be at low tide or at least that more water was usually present. The water here was surprisingly rougher than the water at the Cliffs of Moher had been. This cliff was still really pretty, but the lack of green, the dark and choppy water, and the darkened and rainy sky made the scene a bit dreary. The scenery reflected exactly what she had been hoping for almost a year ago when they had buried her dad. Cara was sad when they had to head back to the bus, but she was ready to leave the morose cliffs behind.

Cara was slightly disappointed when the Spire of Dublin came into view, signaling that the trip through Ireland had come to an end. She was now firmly planted back in Dublin. Ellie all but dragged Cara to a cute little restaurant near their hostel. Pink was the primary color decorating the little eatery named Póg. The definition and translation printed on the wall described Póg as the Gaelic word for *kiss*. It advertised

healthy and delicious food, and Ellie had been wanting to go since they noticed it the night before. Both girls picked a salad and then splurged for big portions of frozen yogurt. The frozen yogurt melted as they ate their delicious salads, but the wait was worth it. Cara's first bite had her mouth puckering at the sour taste of the plain organic yogurt, but the flavor combined with the sweet strawberries she had picked as a topping grew on her so much that by the time she was finished she wished she'd bought a larger size. At the end of their meal, both girls meandered back to their hostel once again, full of food and tired from another long day of sightseeing.

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The next day the two walked around Dublin once again. They found the statue of Molly Malone, a fictional character from a song that the Dubliners deemed worthy of a statue. Cara was incredibly amused by the humor of the Irish people. Ellie worked up the courage to touch one of the statue's breasts, earning herself some good luck. They also were able to find the area where Jonathan Swift was born. They only knew it was the correct spot because there was a plaque marking it. After that discovery, they came across the place where the first performance of George Frederic Handel's *Messiah* occurred.

They ended their little tour by stopping in one of the souvenir shops they had passed by many times. Cara and Ellie went absolutely crazy over the many different options of souvenirs that they had. Cara spent so long in front of the coasters trying to pick fewer than three that she finally just gave up and tossed four into her basket. She had so many things in her basket that she barely even flinched when her total ended up being forty-six Euros. She fared better than Ellie, though, who wound up spending sixty Euros.

They ended up buying much more than they could possibly need, but the shop was so large and had so many great options that it was hard to leave anything behind. Anyway, they told themselves, they had barely purchased any souvenirs at the other places they had been. They were also leaving Ireland behind the next day, so they wouldn't get another chance if they didn't buy something they really wanted.

Cara ended her day by reading more of Gregory's journal. By this point in the journal, he had reached Tuscany. Gregory spoke often of the family he was staying with, in particular the eldest daughter Lairetta. He wrote that he often saw her walking through the garden behind the villa but that he never saw her talking to anyone. He mentioned how he found her very beautiful and wanted to speak to her father about courting her. Cara thought it was strange that Lairetta never responded when Gregory called her name to catch her attention, but Cara didn't waste any time worrying about the detail, just as Gregory seemed all too eager to ignore it as well.

The City of Counts

The first place Cara wanted to go after arriving in Barcelona was the Picasso Museum. Ellie thought Picasso was weird, but Cara had always found his style fascinating.

They dropped by their hostel to drop their things off and learned the lay of the land. Their hostel in Barcelona was actually really good for the low price they paid. Their room fit 24 people, which was quite a lot, but they were willing to ignore the icky room for the location of the hostel. They were right next to an inexpensive café and, better yet, their hostel was close to the center of the city. They didn't even have to take a metro to get to the famous places of the city.

Even so, they had to walk for a bit before they found the museum. They ended up going the wrong way and getting a little lost, so they found themselves in a park with an odd blue sculpture. Whether the sculpture was meant to be a serpent or a wave wasn't too obvious to them, but the work of art was ceramic and glinted in the sunlight. Cara and Ellie kept walking and eventually found a recognizable landmark from which they could find their way: Barcelona's Arc de Triomf. The arch loomed high above. The crowns at the very top of the structure made it appear regal, with red bricks adding to the effect. The palm trees lining the walkway leading to and from the arch gave it a tropical feel. Ellie posed like a queen carrying a scepter while Cara smiled at her antics. Walking from the Arc de Triomf only took about 15 minutes to get to the Picasso museum.

They were forbidden from taking pictures in the museum, but the two got some okay ones of the courtyard. They decided to start at the right side of the museum, which was where Picasso's earlier paintings were held. Neither Ellie nor Cara had realized that Picasso's style hadn't always been so *Picasso-like* and full of Cubism. One of Cara's absolute favorites was a piece entitled *La primera comunió*, completed in 1896. The painting depicted a woman in white who was wearing a veil and kneeling in front of a communion table, a priest standing to her left and a young boy adjusting a flower vase on the table in front of her. The lighting in the painting was phenomenal: the light from the candles set off a pleasant glow that faded toward the back of the setting, which was a small room. A later painting from 1917 that Cara was obsessed with was Picasso's *Dona amb mantellina*, also called *La Salchichona*. In this one, the colors were myriad and vivid. There were pinpricks of color that combined to become an outline of a beautiful woman sitting. The painting was not entirely filled in, almost as if Picasso got bored with the painting and decided to move on before filling it in.

In fact, it seemed to Cara and Ellie that Picasso just seemed to get progressively more bored overall. He started out as a master of painting at a young age and then slowly progressed into the art form for which most people recognize him. One could compare his early paintings to his later ones and not even recognize the artist as the same person. It seemed like a switch may have gone off in his brain one day where he said, *I've perfected my craft, what else is there?* and then proceeded to mess with art as a way to relieve his boredom and prove that there's more to the craft than simple paintings. Ellie and Cara laughed to themselves as the paintings progressed. They pointed out the difference

between the gorgeous and lifelike depictions of women in Picasso's earlier paintings and his later triangle-faced ladies. By the end of the exhibit, Cara decided she loved Picasso even more and Ellie discovered that Picasso was truly an artistic genius. Since they couldn't take actual pictures, the two loaded up on postcard replicas of their favorite paintings.

After the museum, the two wandered around a little bit and happened upon a park. They sat down next to a tree and relaxed a little, enjoying the lovely afternoon weather. Some people were there with their dogs, and Cara tried to sneak pictures of the happy puppies running around. Ellie spied a golden statue over the treetops and urged Cara to get up and check it out further. They followed a path through the park and came across an area full of life. The ground was sand-like rather than grassy and there were people riding bikes and running around. Two people were in a gazebo to the left dancing a routine with each other. There was a fountain, too, which was where the golden statue Ellie had seen was located. A man was making giant bubbles in front of the fountain, and a little girl was running around trying to catch them. Streams of water were shooting up from the pool in front of the main part of the fountain. What looked like four-legged eagles made of stone were spitting out water into the pool as well. The water was a green color, flowing and swirling constantly. In the center was a forest of green, horses rearing from its midst and a trio of people perched at the top of the small waterfall. A family of ducks swam across the front of the pool. The tiny little ducklings trailed quickly behind their parent. Stairs led from the left and right up to a balcony overlooking the fountain's pool. At the very top of the structure sat a golden statue of four horses pulling a woman on a

chariot. The area felt magical because the sun was so low in the sky and was glinting off of the golden decorations and the rippling water.

The Catalan parliament building was close by. The two passed advertisements to the park's zoo as well as a lake where people were rowing boats in pairs. While Cara and Ellie were admiring the parliament building, a man pushing a stroller while riding some sort of circular hoverboard or electric unicycle came rolling past. After the unexpected site, Ellie and Cara looked at each other and erupted into giggles. They made sure to walk back by the fountain and the Arc de Triomf on their way back to their hostel for the evening. For the next day, they had some touristy sights planned in addition to something a little spontaneous: a science museum for which they had seen an advertisement.

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After a free breakfast at their hostel consisting primarily of bread and cold cuts, Cara and Ellie joyfully walked to the Sagrada Família. Once again, they were able to see a gorgeous and breathtaking piece of architecture. The building towered high above them, almost like it was reaching for the sun or, in the night time, the stars high above. The cranes took away from the effect a little bit, but it was impressive to think that even in that moment in time people were working on perfecting the building. The reaching pillar-like parts of the structure had an appearance like the bones of a giant. Cara couldn't even fathom the hard work and talent that went into creating such an intricate and towering structure. Once inside, Cara's breath was stolen once again, this time by the brilliant colors reflected onto the stone of the building by the stained-glass windows. Cara felt like she could reach out and grasp the colors in her hands, like she could dance in them and

bathe herself in their prismatic light. She refrained herself, however, and contented herself with admiring the view like the rest of the people around her. She thought it was beyond ingenious how the colors from the stained glass were designed to heat up or cool down the building depending on the position of the sun. Looking at the building around her, Cara made plans to come back when the temple was finished, even though she would have to wait at least 10 years.

They next walked to the Casa Batlló. Even if not for the signs and the people crowding the sidewalk, Cara and Ellie would have recognized the house by its decorations on the outside. The building looked like it had vines creeping all the way up its walls, but instead of an actual plant the vine was made of colored tiles. Even the window had odd designs. Entering the building made the two feel like they were in some sort of underwater cave. Some of the walls looked like they had scales, like the walls were made of snake skin rather than plaster and paint. The whole building was truly a work of art and the view from the top was like something out of a movie. Cara honestly felt like she was either in a movie or a piece of artwork; she could think of no other way to describe the Casa Batlló.

As weird as they knew others might find it because of the European habit of walking everywhere, Cara and Ellie took a bus and then walked to a science museum towards the edge of the city called CosmoCaixa. The fact that the museum was considered one of the best in the country piqued the two's curiosity. It had so many floors and things in the museum that the two easily got lost. One thing – among many – that captured their attention was a recreation of a rainforest habitat. The exhibit had fish of all

shapes and sizes, turtles, birds, and even more things they were barely able to glimpse before the animals hurried back into hiding. A giant tree loomed up out of the center of the exhibit. Something else they spent an absurd amount of time admiring was a wall that, if you stood in front of it, reflected shadows of you in yellow, blue, and red, which mixed to make other colors, too, of course. Cara made it a goal of hers to do a funny dance in front of the screen, her shadows dancing colorfully behind her. There were also plenty of hands-on activities to entertain them. They got so wrapped up in the fun that, before they knew it, it was the museum's 8 PM closing time. They had absolutely no idea how so much time had passed. The day had somehow gone completely by them.

They decided to stop at the little café named La Medi next to their hostel for dinner. By the time they made it there, it was about 9 PM, an acceptable time for dinner in Barcelona. Cara and Ellie had learned that the Spanish tend to eat dinner late at night. They elected to eat outside at one of the tables lining the street. The two shared a paella and tried some authentic Spanish sangria. After the phenomenal dinner, in the comfort of her bunk, Cara read some more of Gregory's journal. He had begun to court Lauretta and felt that he was falling in love with her. He found her to be intelligent, funny, and beautiful. He filled page after page with descriptions that showed how much he adored Lauretta. The only thing that darkened his thoughts was something he referred to as *the burden of a difference of communication*. Nonetheless, even with his business running smoothly and possibly coming to a close, Gregory could not imagine leaving the side of his dearest Lauretta.

Cara felt their last day in Barcelona like a weight on her shoulders. The two had decided to spend their last day enjoying the one thing they couldn't imagine leaving Barcelona without doing: going to the beach. In order to enjoy the experience and the day more, they took the long walk there slowly. They stopped at the Catedral de Barcelona. They took pictures of the different shaped letters spelling out *Barcino*. Even though they hadn't made it to Italy yet, the area had a Tuscan feel to it. Cara and Ellie took a back alleyway that brought them to a gelato shop called Mannà. The gelato there was out of this world, and the crepe Ellie got, which Cara stole a couple bites from, was warm and delightful. While eating, Cara and Ellie played a game of pointing to different cartoon depictions of people on the walls and saying *that's me* with wide grins. The boats they passed at the docks were ginormous and absurd. Cara and Ellie played another game of guessing how insanely rich the owners were and how much the boats had to have cost; the best guess was *billions and millions*.

The beach was much more crowded than either girl would have preferred, but they realized that they should have expected that from such a touristy location. Having entirely forgotten their towels, the two decided to just sit down on the damp sand. After snapping a couple pictures of the picturesque beach and waves, Cara leaned back with her eyes closed to soak up the experience. A light breeze flowed through her hair and the sun shone down on her, making her feel warm and comfortable. Cara didn't know how much time had passed when Ellie elbowed her in the side. Startled, Cara quickly sat up straight as her hands slid out from behind her.

What? she asked Ellie, her heavy head urging her to doze off again.

These people are annoying! Ellie's eyes flashed in anger and her face scrunched up in annoyance as she waved at a person who had just passed the two of them.

Are they? Why? Cara responded, leaning back to soak up more sun. Ellie's eyes narrowed at Cara.

They keep bothering me with flyers and products. Cara replied with a noncommittal hum. She could understand how that could be annoying, but it wasn't bothering her. Ellie flopped back on the sand.

Sometimes I envy you.

Cara huffed out a laugh in response to Ellie's statement. She didn't know how anyone could even remotely envy her until that moment. Ellie was being harassed by advertisers while Cara was enjoying the beauty of the Spanish beach. It was actually kind of funny, Cara being able to enjoy something touristy more than Ellie.

Cara's eyes narrowed again, this time in protection against the wind and sun. The waves beat repetitively against the beach's sand. A sailboat was just visible out on the water. There was a couple having their own little photo shoot on the beach, posing together with the water as a backdrop. Cara smiled at a pigeon pecking its way along the sand, though the plump bird ignored her.

Do you want to find a different stretch of the beach to sit on? Ellie asked Cara, annoyance still evident on her face as she glared at another approaching person. Cara shrugged as a reply, and the two picked themselves up and dusted the sand off of their jeans. Walking down the beach, they came across some very impressive sand art as well as a sculpture of stacked cubes with windows. After walking a bit, they finally found a

part of the beach that wasn't as crowded. This part even had a little bar with reclining beach chairs.

They purchased different flavored margaritas and made their way out to two recliners next to each other. After a couple of minutes, one of the men from the bar brought their drinks out to them. Cara's drink was decorated with some lime rind and tasted sweet, mainly of lime. Ellie's drink was pink with a strawberry decorating the glass' rim. On this stretch of the beach, the wind was slightly stronger, and Cara's icy drink helped ward off the heat from the sun overhead. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes once again.

She couldn't remember feeling so at peace. She felt the warmth of the sun, the caress of the wind, and the open sea before her. Before, when she was in high school, she could have never relaxed like this. In all of the other busy cities they'd visited, Cara hadn't had a chance to sit down outdoors and close her eyes to the world. She took a breath, and her problems melted away. She could clearly imagine her future, and it wasn't so dark anymore. Her future had always seemed blurry and bleak because she could never imagine herself being able to do anything, but her travels were proving her wrong time and time again. She could go to college. Even if she faced challenges, which she would, she could overcome them, especially if she had this memory to come back to during stressful times. The wind beckoned her, whispering in her ear that she didn't need to fear the future. All she needed to do was relax, and things would work out. She gripped the cold cup of her drink, at odds with the warm air around her.

A trio of people walked up and sat in the row of chairs in front of Ellie and Cara. They laughed and talked to each other. Beside Cara, Ellie sat reading a book she'd picked up about European cuisine, her drink in one hand and the book in the other. Everything was calm and peaceful, and for once, Cara didn't envy the people talking animatedly around her. She took a sip of her drink and stared out at the seemingly endless Mediterranean Sea.

The Grey City

They had taken a plane once again because a bus ride to Berlin would have been excruciating and outrageous. Cara and Ellie were very sad to leave behind the sunshine and warmth of Barcelona for the cloudier and slightly chillier Berlin. Berlin, too, was more about education than relaxation. Instead of spending time sipping drinks on the beach, the two would be walking around the city and learning about the history.

Through a quest for comfort, Cara managed to convince Ellie to go with her to the McDonald's by the US Army Checkpoint. They sat by a window and watched as overexcited tourists paid to take pictures with men dressed up as soldiers at their post. Instead of following in other tourists' lead, they made the walk to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The wide expanse of the stone slabs, almost like coffins holding the lost opportunities of those persecuted during the Nazi regime, was humbling in a way Cara never could have imagined. Walking through the memorial, Cara felt the loss of all of those people. She saw some people climbing onto and standing on one and wished she had the power to berate them for their disregard for the importance of the memorial.

Ellie noticed the line for the museum and pulled Cara over to stand in it. Cara had been in other Holocaust museums, but there was something different about going to one located in Berlin, the heart of where it all stemmed from. For once, she didn't take any pictures. She wanted to experience it all rather than focus on documenting it for later.

Cara and Ellie observed at different paces and got separated, but they met up at the end and exited together. Somehow, the day seemed darker and more somber than when they had gone into the museum. Ellie remembered hearing that there was another memorial in the park next to the Jewish memorial, so the two headed over there in the hope of finding it.

They came across something that they thought was it at a first glance. It was a giant metal rectangle, completely plain except for a little window cut into one of the sides. It was imposing and odd, just like the Jewish memorial in a sense. It had no plaque or sign indicating anything about it. Standing back, one could see that there was a screen inside playing a video. Ellie was the first to peek inside the window to see exactly what was playing. She pressed her face into the screen for a minute before leaning back out and looking at Cara with a grin.

What is it? Cara asked, curious about her friend's grin.

Take a look. It's fantastic. It doesn't need a sign. Ellie backed up to walk around the concrete rectangle.

Cara poked her head in the window and was immediately taken aback by the scene demonstrated in the video she saw. It took her mind a moment to realize that the two people in the video were men because all she noticed at first was two people kissing passionately on loop. She thought the memorial, though a bit dull, was a wonderful way to make people face homophobia head on. People, tourists especially, would approach the odd concrete rectangle in the park and be presented with a display of homosexual love

and normalcy. This memorial wasn't as obvious as the Jewish memorial, but it still made its point that society should learn to be kinder and less judgmental.

Isn't it great? Ellie asked Cara with a smile once Cara had finished peeking at the video and Ellie had finished circling the structure.

It is! It's simple but perfect.

I agree. I'm really glad they have this.

Tearing themselves away from the area with the memorials took a while, but they wanted to walk around a little and see some more of the city. They discovered that they were very close to the Brandenburg Gate. Other tourists lingered around the area taking pictures. Cara and Ellie walked from behind the gate to in front of it to stand in the middle of Pariser Platz. There were fewer people in front of the gate for some reason, and the angle of light from the sun made it seem simultaneously heavenly and foreboding. They discovered that a company held free tours starting from the square, but they had missed all of the tours for the day. Cara wasn't interested in going on a tour, but she agreed to return the next day for Ellie's sake. Before making the long walk back to their hostel, the two ducked into the Starbucks in the square for some much-needed caffeine, even though there was a chance that doing so might cause them to stay up late. They had seen and had more American food that day than they had even imagined having during their whole trip so far, and while having so much made them feel guilty, it also brought about a feeling of contentment they didn't know they needed.

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Even though they didn't say it out loud to each other, both Cara and Ellie had somehow made an agreement to return to the Starbucks the next day before the tour. They left for the square early, and their path led them straight there. They had just enough time after signing up for the tour to order and get their drinks before they were rounded up and put in their group.

The tour they took passed many places they had already been before, but Cara appreciated the chance to go back by some things and have another look. Close to the Jewish Memorial was a parking lot where Hitler's bunker had been. It chilled her to think that Hitler used to inhabit the same area in which she now stood, but she was also amused that the area was reduced to a sad little parking lot not even worthy of pavement.

Their walk brought them to an area where the Berlin wall still partially stood. It took Ellie pointing it out for Cara to realize that the line on the street was a marking of where the wall used to be. The distance that used to cost someone's life to travel was now something Cara could simply just ignore and walk over. Ellie also pointed out some gold-colored bricks in the sidewalk. The bricks commemorated victims of the Holocaust and were placed where the people used to live before they were ripped from their lives. The bricks were one more way in which the victims could be remembered and society could be taught.

The tour ended pretty soon after that, so Cara and Ellie wandered back to where they began so they could see the Reichstag building. They had registered the night before for a tour and rushed to get there in time. They were once again confronted with a gorgeous building with columns in the front. Once through security, they took the

elevator to the top. There, the view of the city wasn't super impressive, but the view of the building was incredible. A giant paneled glass dome was at the center, a cone at the center of that. Cara could see people walking up to the top of the dome. Inside, the cone in the middle looked like many mirrors reflecting outward. Cara could glance down and see into the room below if she tried. She followed Ellie up the ramp to the top. The cone in the middle only got more remarkable the higher they got.

At the very top was a circular bench at the center of the area with a circular skylight above. Cara was too afraid to look straight down too much, but she admired the sky and the building around them while Ellie did so. Walking back down gave them a better view of the city surrounding them than being at the very top or very bottom of the dome did. They made sure to get the German flag in the background of every picture they took. When Cara did manage to look down at the glass below, she could see the cone in the center of the dome reflected over and over again. The design of the dome was meant to signify transparency in the government.

The complete opposite of what the dome was meant to signify was represented in the remnants of the Berlin wall. The small segment she had seen before did nothing to prepare her for the site of a massive chunk of the wall still standing next to a small memorial for those who lost their lives trying to cross the wall. A lone cross at the edge of the area caught Cara's attention. The sign next to the cross said that it was there to commemorate WWII victims whose bodies were not exhumed and were probably built over when the border grounds for the wall were put in place. In addition to the looming graffiti-covered wall and the surrounding preserved remnants of the wall and border area,

there were probably human remains buried under the ground beneath their feet. The further disrespect of life was crazy to think about.

The preserved construction of the wall and the border grounds were alarming. Cara could not imagine trying to get across something like that. There had been nothing to hide behind while trying to sneak across the great distance. If one wanted to try to make it to the other side, one would have had to stealthily run across an open field of sorts, knowing the chances of making it were very slim. Not only that, but the height of the wall would have been almost impossible to get over. She knew there were those who succeeded in such a task, but she couldn't imagine it being possible.

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Cara and Ellie wanted to have fun and enjoy the excitement of being in Germany, but they could both feel an invisible weight in the air reminding them of the history that must be acknowledged. Even though there had undoubtedly been a lot of it, the historical context of the other places they'd visited hadn't been something they'd thought about too much. Their need to learn more led them to sign up for a tour of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp.

The walk from the train station to the camp built up a feeling of buzzing nervousness in Cara. She had only ever read briefly about concentration camps, but now she would actually be seeing one. Approaching the camp, it was crazy to her to see how close the residential area was to it. One could potentially just walk outside to their yard and be right there at the camp. Walking into the entrance area, Cara didn't feel much different. It was as they got closer and closer to the actual entrance of the camp that Cara

began to understand. The tour of the camp wasn't so much about what one could see as about what one felt. The camp was still, even with all of the people and movement.

The clock at the entrance to the camp was set at 11:07, the time that troops had arrived to free the camp. The gate displayed the traditional words of *Arbeit Macht Frei*, meaning *Work Sets You Free*. The layout of the camp was open, something which the Nazis used to keep an eye on prisoners. Cara first noticed the track where prisoners had been forced to test out boots.

Cara and Ellie's group was allowed to go inside one of the barracks. The paint from the ceiling was peeling off in the dining hall, adding to the effect of the dinginess of the room. The bedroom consisted of rows of bunk beds pressed up against each other from one wall all the way to the other. Each bed had three bunks. Each bed only had slabs of wood unevenly placed to support one while sleeping. Those sleeping on the top bunks hadn't had the privilege of ladders. Between one long row of beds and the next was only a small aisle able to fit one person. Sleeping there would have meant sleeping in practically the same bed as those around you.

As a small open room with fewer than 10 toilets, the bathroom wasn't any better. A sign on the wall next to the room said that prisoners were only allowed to use the restroom twice a day and only for a few minutes. It also said that the unaired space was sometimes used to enact torment on the prisoners.

Another area nearby was used as a prison within the prison. Three poles outback remained, marking where prisoners would be forced to hang by their restrained wrists

from a nail at the top of the pole. Cells inside the jail building were incredibly small with only enough room for a tiny bed, a table, and a stool.

The group was allowed to go into the old kitchen building that had been converted into a sort of museum. No pictures were allowed in the building out of respect for the prisoners who had been there. In the building, there were items from the prisoners found around the camp as well as items that had been used in the camp. Downstairs were cellar rooms; the cellar where the prisoners peeled potatoes contained wall paintings. An alcove downstairs also had an urn containing ashes. The group was given a break and a chance to eat something, but Cara didn't think she could stomach anything in that moment.

The next place their tour took them was somewhere Cara didn't think should ever, *ever* exist. Ellie, appalled, relayed that the shack to their left was where executions took place. Prisoners were forced to stand there and be shot. Next to that was the area where the gas chambers were. While others from their group walked around it, Cara stayed at the front with the statue. Cara didn't feel like she could stomach curiously walking around an area that others were taken to die; prisoners of the camp were taken there to be murdered, but Cara didn't need to fear any death or harm coming to her while in the ruins of the gas chamber or, with that in mind, the camp as a whole.

That thought was where their tour left them. The tour guide collected all the members of their group and led them back to the railway station. Some people went to the bakery across the street from the station while they waited, but Cara still felt like she couldn't eat anything. On the train ride back to Berlin, Cara and Ellie sat quietly next to

each other processing what they had seen. Cara didn't know if she could handle going somewhere like Auschwitz, a much larger concentration camp.

The tour took most of the day, so Cara and Ellie decided just to go back to their hostel rather than trying to find something small to do after the day they had had. Cara took out Gregory's journal in an attempt to distract herself.

At this point in his journal, Gregory had begun to jump around a bit and miss some days. The work he was doing and the time he spent with Laretta was keeping him very busy. He had been wooing her for quite a while. It had been so long, in fact, that they had gotten engaged, something that Gregory wrote about immediately in a long entry. The romantic in Cara rejoiced at the couple's happiness. Gregory's journal said that they would be marrying in January before heading back to England with Gregory's family to stay there for a short while. Only his parents were going to make the journey down to Tuscany for the wedding. His siblings had either business or family matters to keep them in England. It was obvious that Gregory loved Laretta immensely and couldn't wait to be married to her. Reading about this, Cara hoped that she, too, would be able to be successful and have a family one day, but Cara felt she was nothing like Gregory's amazing Laretta, so she couldn't envision Laretta and Gregory's happiness for herself.

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For the next few days, Cara and Ellie tried to enjoy Berlin a bit. They walked around a lot. They took some time to go to the mall. At the mall, Ellie enjoyed the shopping while Cara enjoyed looking around for golden plaques on the floor with quotes,

primarily from American presidents. It was somehow funny to her to see quotes written in German from American presidents throughout a mall in Berlin. Cara and Ellie somehow found themselves at the Starbucks in Pariser Platz every day without even meaning to. Ellie made Cara go find the Fernsehturm, a television tower they had been able to see from the Reichstag dome.

They enjoyed their time in Berlin just as much as they learned from their time there. Cara knew that her time in Berlin had permanently changed the way she viewed life and society. Even with all of the other things they did, Cara could see the concentration camp every time she closed her eyes. Cara could imagine and feel the fear of someone stuck on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall. Living in America, Cara had always felt so removed from the history of the rest of the world because she could only understand so much when reading about events and places in a book, even one containing historical photographs. Being in Berlin and seeing the remnants of the past made Cara begin to understand the enormity of what had happened. She felt connected to the place and to the past. She could reach out and touch the history. Before, history was pretty cool to Cara, but after Berlin, history seemed fascinating and essential.

The City of a Hundred Spires

Trying to safely cross the street in Prague was nearly impossible. The light at the crosswalk lasted somewhere around five seconds. In order to cross the road successfully, Ellie and Cara had to lean down into a runner's pose and then sprint across the road as soon as the light changed, which meant it was safe to cross. It was exhilarating but also a bit terrifying. That was Prague, though, Cara was coming to realize. One second the city was gorgeous and the next it felt like the setting of a horror film.

The first thing they had to do was check into their hostel, a quaint one that was kind of underground and very cool. It had cozy tables with pillows on the benches and a bar that was quite pretty. Something was wrong with their reservation, but the people who worked there were incredibly nice, and they got everything figured out quickly. Their room was one of Cara's favorites so far, and the bathroom seemed like heaven after all of the dirty ones they'd been in recently. It was the first time she wasn't scared to take a shower since Edinburgh.

After checking out their hostel, the two decided to explore the town, too, even though they were incredibly tired from getting up so early for their bus. It was still early in the day, though, so they had no legitimate excuse not to explore. Cara and Ellie had wanted to join a tour group, but they had elected to just look up places that were important to see instead of following around yet another group, especially one they actually had to pay for.

Because it was one of the highlights of the city, Cara and Ellie headed towards Old Town Square, but Ellie wanted to first find the memorial to Franz Kafka. Ellie loved Kafka's work, especially his short story "A Hunger Artist." She felt that Kafka's imagery was haunting but beautiful, and one of Ellie's main reasons for wanting to visit Prague was to see the Kafka memorial and be in the same city someone she admired had lived in. The statue of Franz Kafka was as interesting as Kafka's works. It consisted of a large headless, armless, and footless man with a smaller man on his shoulders. The shoes of the smaller man were rubbed bronze by those who wanted luck from the statue of the famous writer. Ellie added her touch to the statue and Cara hesitantly followed after her. Maybe she would get some good luck, some dawning of hope and fortune.

Even with the large number of people around, a ton of birds had gathered in the square. Cara had never seen so many pigeons in one place. There was a street performer, too: a clown dressed as a baby in a stroller. Ellie and Cara gave him a wide berth.

There was a giant statue in the middle of the square around which many people were standing. It was the Jan Hus Monument. Cara had read up on it after seeing its giant form during her Google Maps research into Prague tourist spots. Jan Hus was burned as a heretic after being excommunicated from the church and later rejecting a command to renounce his ideas. His death led to a rebellion, which inevitably failed. The monument depicted Jan Hus with people around him. Cara loved one of the inscriptions on the monument, a quote from Hus that read, *Love each other and wish the truth to everyone*. He didn't seem to her like a man who deserved to be burned at the stake.

Close by were 27 crosses on the ground where noblemen were executed. The white crosses were next to the astronomical clock that Ellie wanted to see. Cara hadn't been as interested, but, looking up at the clock, she could see how fantastic it was. She thought this one was even more impressive than the one in Leicester. Cara tugged on Ellie's sleeve, and Ellie tore her eyes away from the clock.

Holy shit.

Right? It's pretty impressive. Cara never knew it was possible to agree with such a statement about a clock, but the astronomical clock before her was definitely impressive. Even though it didn't seem like much, there was something about the design of the clock that made it more than just a clock. It was a magical clock that told viewers where in time and space they were. This was more of a *where* clock than a *when* clock.

From in front of the clock and in the square, they could see a church across the way, but didn't know what it was or if it was significant. The building had a green roof and reached above the buildings around it. The church matched the gothic look of the astronomical clock. While Cara and Ellie were staring at the distant church, it began to rain slightly. They were both lucky they had paid attention to the grey sky earlier and thought to bring their umbrellas.

Rather than stay in the wet square, they thought they would go check out another interesting statue that people had recommended tourists see in Prague. The sculpture was entitled *In Utero*. Basically, it was a giant metal naked pregnant woman kneeling on the ground. Cara had butterflies doing so because the concept was bizarre, but she climbed up inside the statue like one was supposed to do. Being inside the sculpture felt like being

in a womb. Inside was dark and scary. She stayed inside the statue for a little while, but Cara felt the whole experience would be less existentially scarring if she hadn't known the sculpture was a pregnant lady; it made her think about life and her existence, something she didn't want to do on a rainy day in a strange city.

Because they were in the area, they chose to go find a concert and exhibition building, the Rudolfinum, that that had been used by the Nazis during World War II. The building was right next to where the Jewish Ghetto used to be. It was now deemed the Jewish Quarter, or Josefov, and it maintained the structures from the past. Cara and Ellie were just passing through the area really, but they paused to look at a couple of specific things, such as the layered cemetery – the graves were stacked on top of each other to save space – and the synagogues. They were both somber while walking through the ghetto for no reason other than they felt like they should be. It had the same feel to it as the concentration camp outside of Berlin. The mood wasn't helped by the fact that the rain had picked up slightly. The reviews were true that there were supposed to be impressive busts on the top of the Rudolfinum and a view from in front of the city's castle off in the distance, but Ellie and Cara wished they had more information about the history of the building. The idea of Nazi soldiers occupying a place of art and music would have been more comical if it weren't so disquieting.

They decided to go from there to the Charles Bridge next and then back to their hostel. Going to the bridge ended up taking more time than they thought it would because they got caught up in the sights and the stores they found on their path, heading both to and from the bridge. Luckily, by the time they made it to the bridge, the rain had stopped.

The sky was still dark grey, but they were able to close their umbrellas for an unimpeded view of the bridge and the river. The Charles Bridge was more than just a passageway from one side of the river to the other, from the Old Town to the Malá Strana. The bridge was a Baroque work of art. Statues lined the expanse of the bridge; artists displayed and sold their works; and people were walking, resting, and generally enjoying the day. A mass of swans was under the bridge; the beautiful birds were floating majestically on the still water. While the whole city seemed to epitomize the same feeling of otherworldliness, the setting of the bridge felt especially mystical, like someone had opened a portal to another world and Ellie and Cara had unknowingly stepped through into it. They spent some time on the bridge simply leaning over the railing's edge, looking out on the water and watching the swans.

Close to the entrance to the bridge on the side they exited from, on the Old Town side, they found a little shop selling shelves full of Matryoshka Nesting Dolls. They spent more than a couple of minutes browsing the selection and giggling to themselves about some of the designs of the dolls. Ellie had a not-so-secret obsession with the band One Direction and set her sights on a themed doll, the layers of which contained different individual members of the band. The outside layer was Niall Horan, whose album Ellie had been listening to on repeat during the duration of their trip. Cara decided not to buy anything for herself, but she found a cute tiny figurine that was painted like a stereotypical Matryoshka Nesting Doll and a toothpick holder that she thought her mom might enjoy. After a lot of deliberation, she eventually decided on one wearing a lime green dress because green was her mom's favorite color.

They walked back through Old Town Square as it seemed to be the focal point of the city and the best place from which to find one's way. They passed souvenir shops and clothing stores. Cara physically stopped Ellie and pulled her into the clothing store Zara that they came across. Cara wasn't super passionate about clothing, but she had been wanting to check out a Zara for a while.

It was nighttime by then, dark with the absence of the sun but bright from the presence of the moon above and the lights around. They didn't think they could find their hostel in the dark, but Ellie's magical navigation skills somehow led them there. After getting ready for bed, her eyes half-lidded with sleep, Cara slipped into her soft and plush bed. She drifted quickly off into sleep, her dreams reflecting the Baroque scenery and filled with angels and monsters.

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After filling to the brim with delicious foods and drinks from the hostel's array of breakfast items, Cara and Ellie left for the St. Vitus Cathedral. They had to ride a tram to get there, and the various places on the way filled the suspense of the wait nicely. A tourist website had raved about the cathedral, so Cara and Ellie were curious about what made the place so great.

Outside the gates were soldiers standing completely still in booths, in the same way that the soldiers stood outside of Buckingham Palace. People were taking pictures with and trying to distract the soldiers. Cara felt a twinge of guilt for the soldiers at how much tourists probably bothered them during their work days. Nonetheless, she sneakily took a picture of the serious man in a military uniform. Cara and Ellie ignored the

courtyard as they walked through it to get to the area with the cathedral. Once they reached the building, Cara didn't quite know if she liked it. Sure, the building was tall and gothic, but it looked timeworn and faded. Based on the outside alone, she thought the inside might have the same old and battered look. She didn't really want to wait in the line to get in, but they had come all that way, and Ellie was excited. Cara grumpily stood in the line, the progress of which luckily didn't take too long.

Cara walked into the nave and, when she looked to her right, felt as if her soul had left her body. Her breath definitely left her lungs. The walls were pink and purple from the light; it actually looked like the walls were glowing. Cara knew the colors were from the light reflecting from the windows, but she couldn't help but ignore the facts and see the light as something ethereal emanating from the walls around her. It was like a light in the dark. It was one of the most stunning things Cara had ever seen, and by this point in the trip Cara had seen a lot of stunning things. Cara turned to Ellie and saw the same look of awe on her face as she knew was probably evident on her own.

That's so beautiful, man.

That is the most beautiful stained glass I have ever had the privilege of setting my eyes on, Ellie agreed.

Do you see the way the light from the windows reflects off of the walls?

Cara felt giddy with the excitement coursing through her veins. At least with the Sagrada Família she knew it was going to be beautiful. The surprise of the gorgeous windows made the St. Vitus Cathedral so much more beautiful. Cara had decided she actually liked the Gothic architecture on display outside. She also had a newfound

appreciation for stained glass. The way Cara saw it, *this* was a true stained glass window. Ellie had to forcefully drag Cara out of the building because Cara was in no way leaving on her own.

Stepping outside made her feel like she was in another world all over again.

Next door was the Great South Tower, which contained a scenic outlook at the very top. They had to pay to get in, but the fancy coin they received and the thought of seeing Prague from a vantage point high in the sky were too tempting to pass up. Even so, Cara felt like she might wheeze herself to death only halfway up. They had to stop for a bit and press themselves against the wall so that the more athletic people could pass. The back of Cara's mind reminded her that she should have realized how many stairs there would be because of the height of the building, but she was in no way listening to that know-it-all part of her brain. The two eventually felt okay enough to climb the rest of the way to the top.

The first thing that struck Cara when she looked out through the bars at the city was that some of the roofs were green, even part of the roof of the building she was currently in. It was just like the church they had seen yesterday while in Old Town Square. She had no idea why the roofs would be green, but it painted a pretty picture. The view was filled with so much green, orange, and brown. Ellie and Cara slowly walked around the perimeter, taking pictures of the view as they went. The view from the tower changed depending on which side Cara was facing. From one side of the tower, she could see the Charles Bridge and how incredibly crowded it was. She didn't remember it being that crowded when she was on it, but she had been caught up in the moment. The view of

the city from the tower reflected the feeling Cara got while walking around inside the city. The view from this side was beautiful because of the way the greyness of the sky settled over the city like a well-loved blanket, but on the other side of the tower, the sky was a brilliant baby blue with clouds sketched out across it. She felt like she was looking out at a painting. She felt, too, like a giant looking down at a tiny picturesque village. Walking from one side to the other was like experiencing night and day. Cara thought it was funny how much the number of clouds could change one's perspective of the whole city.

When they finally decided to leave, they took a cobblestone path that would lead down the hill. They wanted to walk back rather than take the tram again. Ellie tripped on one of the stones, but Cara was fast enough and caught her before she had the misfortune to completely fall. Ellie took tiny, careful steps for a while until the almost-fall disappeared from her mind, which happened when the two encountered a peculiar statue of a boy. By chance, they looked to their left where a lot of people were congregated and saw the statue. It was a tall and skinny boy looking up at the sky. He was naked, as most people in statues are, and due to luck gained from the act of rubbing it, the penis of the statue had a golden gleam to it, much like the shoes on the Kafka statue had had. They knew it was probably immature to find this amusing, but they found the whole thing very funny anyway. They had to give each other warning looks to keep from laughing out loud in front of the crowd of tourists around them.

A little bit down the hill and to the right was an overhang surrounded by a brick wall and with another incredible view of the city. Ellie decided to be daring and stuck her

foot in a little window in the wall so that she could hoist herself up and lean over it for a better view. Ellie got some really lovely pictures with the wall and the orange rooftops; she showed them to Cara, who had decided to enjoy the view from a safe distance.

Prague is really pretty, Cara said after seeing the pictures.

It is! It's haunting but lovely.

A little nook in the wall selling food and drinks was at the bottom of the hill across from a park. Ellie and Cara both decided to try mulled wine and split what was called a chimney cake. The mulled wine was warm and delicious. Cara usually thought wine was terribly bitter, but this wine was sweet. The pastry was delicious, too. They shared one with sugar and nuts on the outside. The chimney cake was really just a tower of soft dough. It was kind of like a long cinnamon roll, minus cinnamon and icing. Ellie and Cara took turns unraveling the treat. Ellie was obviously happy when Cara handed the treat to her and told her she could have the rest because she thought it was too sweet.

Ellie was able to look up some more statues that were close enough to walk to. The two were more than a little curious about these so-called baby statues. They were in a little park by the water. When Cara and Ellie first approached the statues, the two were at a loss for words. They had no idea what to expect, but they never would have expected what they found: giant baby statues with disturbing faces. The statues were all quite terrifying.

The first thing Cara noticed about the babies was that they were huge. The babies dwarfed Cara and Ellie. The top of Cara's head was only just above the bottom of one baby's chin while Ellie, who was a little taller than Cara, was still so small in comparison

that her head only reached the bottom of the giant indent in the baby's face. The giant indent was the second thing Cara noticed about the babies. It looked like someone had taken a panini press to the babies' faces or that someone had taken a grooved bread tin and smashed them in the middle of the faces. They were creepy and weird and absolutely fascinating. Cara and Ellie took turns taking pictures in front of one of the babies, one that was facing away from the walking path of the park so that they could have some trees in the background.

Pretty soon, Cara felt a great urge to climb up on one of the babies for a picture. Someone else had done it while they had been gawking at the weirdness of the babies, and she had been itching to do so, too, ever since. She shoved her camera at Ellie and tried her hardest to climb up on the baby. It took a slight running start, sheer force of will, and some help from Ellie to get Cara somewhat securely up on the baby. Once she finally made it up, she still wasn't safe because she felt herself slipping down the curve of the baby's spine, so she scooted to the top of the baby's shoulders and leaned up to avoid gravity. Ellie burst out laughing at the hilarity of the situation: Cara had climbed on top of a demented metal baby for a picture. Cara couldn't help but smile widely at her situation either. When it was time to get down, however, the situation was no longer funny because she had absolutely no idea how to climb off of the giant structure now that she was securely on it. She finally elected to just leap off, stumbling a little as she made her landing. Ellie absolutely refused to climb up, too, instead walking over to the edge of the water to point out the pier of fake penguins lined up a couple of feet out. Cara and

Ellie were both entertained by the commonplace of the otherwise random pieces of artwork around Prague.

The last thing they decided to see for the day was something Cara had known about and wanted to visit for years: The John Lennon Wall. She knew it was just a graffiti wall, but the sense of community and history that would be present with such a wall made her buzz with the importance of it all.

On their way there, they passed a street performer blowing bubbles. Cara wanted nothing more than to run through the bubbles like a little boy was doing, but she refrained herself for the sake of maturity. They passed a little bridge, too, on which there were locks, romantic symbols and promises from past couples. The wall, when they finally came across it, was bigger than they expected. Cara was expecting it to be small, but the Lennon Wall was in fact huge. There were some people there spray-painting pictures and messages. A boy was writing out *smile* in neon yellow paint. Further down, a girl was creating a giant peace sign in purple paint. The wall was layer upon layer of creative expression. The wall was a collage of the thoughts and feelings of countless people. Cara and Ellie took their time walking along it and looking at what previous people had left as their marks. One hopeful person wrote *I'll be back soon*. Cara wished she could have met the person who had spent time drawing the Avengers symbol in red paint. The common message of the wall was love and acceptance. It was a wall of peace. *All you need is love* indeed.

Ellie had thought to bring a sharpie with her, so, though it wasn't quite spray paint like one was supposed to use on the wall, Ellie and Cara made their marks using blue

sharpie. Ellie wrote her initials and drew a heart in the eye of a giant duck. Cara made sure to take plenty of pictures as evidence of Ellie's daring graffiti. When it was her turn, Cara used a yellow crown as her canvas and wrote in big letters, *make tea not war*. It was a phrase her dad had introduced her to and was one of her favorite sayings. Cara also wrote her mom's initials on the wall. After Cara finished her messages, Ellie and Cara posed under the crown. The angle was difficult, but they slightly managed to make it look like they were wearing the crown in their pictures.

They meandered on their way back to the Old Town. This time when they came across the man with the bubbles, Cara sprinted ahead and danced happily in the floating bubbles. She slapped one between her hands and carefully floated another one over to Ellie. She danced around for a bit, rejoicing in life and not caring if her actions were childlike. She made sure to give the bubble man some money for the joy he gave her.

They found a small little shop just ahead of where the man with the bubbles was. The shop had handmade items of all sorts. Cara was afraid to touch anything in fear of breaking something, but Ellie touched and examined almost everything. She eventually decided to buy something small, a little ceramic figurine painted with small lilac flowers, that she wanted to give to her grandmother when she saw her soon.

Cara decided she wanted to do some souvenir shopping at one of the many shops they passed. Even though it was summer at the moment, she really wanted a sweatshirt for the winter. She found one she almost didn't buy, but she couldn't pass the opportunity of owning the black sweatshirt with the words *Czech Me Out* in red writing on the front. Cara could never pass up a good pun, though Ellie teased her for her choice of sweatshirt

when there were others that were much prettier in the shop. They spent a long time deciding what souvenirs they wanted to get for themselves and their families. None of the small knick-knacks in the store seemed to do the city justice. Prague was magical, and the small gifts were merely pretty tokens. Somehow, they managed to find some acceptable things, and continued on their last walk back to their hostel in Prague.

It was night by the time they made it back to their hostel, and the air had shifted. Prague felt electric at night. The city came alive as the shadows came out. Cara knew she would miss the feeling of Prague, the oddness and rightness of everything in it. Like everywhere else they had been, Cara wished she had more time to get to know the city even more.

The City of Lilies

Cara hadn't had the chance to read Gregory's journal while in Prague, so she made up for lost time on the bus to Florence. The long ride gave her time to finish the rest of the journal with time left over to nap. Cara found out that after being married, Gregory and Lauretta settled down at the Tuscan Villa and took over the management of Lauretta's family's business. They, like many other Tuscans, made and distributed wine. When he had first gotten there, Gregory was not very passionate about the creation of wine, but his time in Tuscany and with Lauretta had molded him into a wine enthusiast. Gregory's family remained in England, but he knew he had grown too much in love with Tuscany to ever leave it permanently. Most of his children, however, chose to move up to live with their English family. It saddened Gregory that his children left him and the life he had made for them in Tuscany, but he understood the appeal of England and London. The journal became sparse after his children began to be born and stopped entirely after some of them departed to England.

Cara felt a lack of closure about Gregory after having invested so much time into his journal and life, so she attempted to see if she could find anything about him online. She knew it would be a long shot, but she wanted to try anyway.

Cara couldn't find anything about Gregory, but she found something using Lauretta's maiden name. Cara found the winery they used to own, sold long ago to another family who kept it running and opened it for tours. Cara was so excited that she

woke Ellie from her nap and told her that she wouldn't accept not going while they were near it. Ellie managed to purchase tickets through a tourist group for them to go the day before the two left Florence.

Cara arrived in Florence full of delight. The hotel they were staying at was close to the Santa Maria Novella train station and the Mercato di San Lorenzo, which was a massive building containing a market and food vendors. On their walk from their hotel to the Duomo, they stopped and got panini from Panbriaco and then went across the street to Antica Gelateria Fiorentina for gelato. They both decided that they didn't want to eat anything else ever again. Cara had never had a better sandwich. Her bread was warm and salty and the cheese and meat absolutely delightful. At the gelateria, Cara decided to get the chocolate and then be adventurous and get an additional scoop of the Ambrosia flavored gelato – flavored with yogurt, cinnamon, and honey according to the sign. As amazing as all the food had been during their travels, Florence's food was the absolute best so far and they had only had lunch and dessert! Since they would be there a couple of days, Cara and Ellie made a deal to try the crepes made at Antica Gelateria Fiorentina as well as all kinds of gelato from there and other places.

The area around the Duomo was insanely crowded, full of tourists and people selling things. Not even five minutes there, Cara thought she might lose her mind if another person shoved a selfie stick in her face. Nonetheless, the Duomo was magnificent. They would be going up to Piazzale Michelangelo across the river later to get a view of it from up high. For now, though, they had plans to climb up to the top of the dome. The climb had 166 more steps than the Great South Tower in Prague had had,

so Cara and Ellie were absolutely exhausted by the time they made it to the top. As in Prague, the view from the top of the dreadful climb was beyond worth the effort and pain. They could see far into the distance. The tops of the buildings were like something from an artistic masterpiece or an award-winning movie. Granted, the city had actually appeared in both. Florence was made to be on a postcard. Starting then and until the moment she left, Cara felt like nothing she was seeing was real because the city was just too picturesque to be so.

They decided to go to the Galleria dell'Academia that day and the Galleria degli Uffizi the next in order to spend an appropriate amount of time at each. They mainly wanted to go to the Academia to see Michelangelo's sculpture *David*. The crowd surrounding the statue was big, but the statue was so large that that didn't really prevent them from seeing it. With the statue at 14 feet tall, Cara and Ellie's heads didn't even reach the feet of it. Cara's favorite part of the *David* were the veins standing out on his hand and arm. The veins were such a small and charming detail, but they must have taken immense effort and time to sculpt. Even the curls on David's head must have taken ages to perfect. Each little detail was absolutely incredible. After seeing the *David*, Cara was amazed by the talent and dedication of Michelangelo and even of all sculptors of statues. She knew if she tried to do anything even similar, she would end up with a spikey block of marble rather than producing a masterpiece. The experience of seeing the *David*, much like many of the other mind-blowing experiences Cara had had, didn't feel real to her. After seeing so many pictures of the sculpture, Cara couldn't believe she was actually seeing the real thing. The same sculpture Cara had in front of her right that moment was

what people for centuries had been writing and talking about. She felt connected somehow to all of those other people who had seen and been impacted by the same thing she was currently seeing.

Cara had never been too artistic herself, so every piece of art in the museum impressed her to no end. By the end of their visit to the museum, Cara and Ellie had made up a game of assigning thought and speech to the subjects of the art pieces. Wide-open mouths generally meant *oh my goodness* or *what on Earth* whereas grim faces became attributes of self-righteous and contemplative people. The game made even the pieces of art they normally wouldn't have focused on much more interesting and entertaining. Even though the museum wasn't very large, their game and their focus on the museum's collection consumed their time.

They stayed until the museum closed and then spent some time wandering around the gorgeous city. Cara loved the streets and the architecture and the feeling in the air. They ended up at Ponte Vecchio and spent awhile just leaning over the railing and looking at the river. They stopped at the Piazza della Signoria and admired the statues on display there. They watched as the city simultaneously settled down and came to life as night hit. The tourists and street vendors seemed to disappear, and the natives came out to enjoy their city in the cover of darkness. People were sitting on the steps of the Duomo relaxing. Cara and Ellie could walk through the piazza without having to shove their way through. As wonderful as the city was in the day, it was even more beautiful at night.

The two found a restaurant near where they were staying that was open late and had inexpensive food, so they stopped by there before going to bed. Cara chose to get the

penne al salmone and Ellie ordered the spaghetti alla carbonara. They both raved about their food to each other so much that they tried each other's food and decided that they had two new dishes to love. After eating, they spent almost an hour sitting at their table until they realized they were supposed to ask for the bill as it was assumed they wanted to relax and socialize after their meal.

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The next day, when they went to the Uffizi, it took them hours and hours to make it through the museum. They stopped in front of every piece of art and examined it, often using their newfound technique of applying stories to the subjects.

Cara loved how there was magnificent art everywhere she looked. Even when she looked up at the ceiling, she was presented with artwork. Cara absolutely loved two sculptures they came across, one a small angel lying on its wings and another a woman wearing a dress reclining on the chair. She took note throughout the museum that the sleeping angel statue she loved was one of many depictions of sleeping angels or cupids. Cara especially loved how realistic the flowing dress of the marble woman appeared: yet another fantastic feat by a sculptor.

Those two sculptures were both before Cara and Ellie came across *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, though. Cara was completely taken aback by the fact that she was seeing such famous paintings in person, just as yesterday she had had the privilege of facing Michelangelo's *David*. Cara and Ellie had to wait in the swarm of people surrounding the paintings to get close enough to see them both, and they had to wait even longer to get pictures taken in front of the paintings. The way the subjects of the paintings

were styled, it was obvious the two paintings were done by the same artist, Sandro Botticelli. Once again, Cara was exceedingly aware that she was looking at an important cultural piece full of history. Ellie and Cara lingered more in front of *The Birth of Venus* than they did *Primavera*, but eventually the crowd of people shifted them away from the painting. At the end of the hallway on that floor was another impressive sculpture that depicted a man being entwined in serpents with two young boys to his left and right. The sculpture, *Laocoon Group* by Baccio Bandinelli, was another unbelievable work of marble. Cloth was hanging from the figures and the snake was wrapped around the limbs of the man. The boys had their hands outstretched toward the man while the man's face showed his worry and distress. Even after seeing all of the statues in the Academia and throughout the Uffizi, Cara felt she would never stop being impressed by marble sculptures.

From a balcony they came across at the museum, they had a wonderful view of the Palazzo Vecchio. They were able to look up at the tower looming over them. The sun was at a point where the sky was still blue but darkening. Cara didn't know that such a shade of blue even existed and pointed out the gorgeous shade to Ellie, who had been too focused on the palazzo's tower to notice the color of the sky. The sky was a deep and brilliant royal blue so startlingly clear that both Cara and Ellie agreed that it seemed like someone had taken a paint roller and swiped it across the sky. Cara couldn't remember ever seeing the sky so blue or intense. The vivid color as a backdrop for the Palazzo Vecchio made the tall tower even more imposing.

A statue Cara and Ellie came across soon after going back inside to the museum had Ellie doubling over in apparent laughter. The statue depicted a small boy leaning backwards and holding bunches of grapes over his head, which was turned over his right shoulder to look at a dog sitting at his feet. The expression on the dog's face was what caused Ellie to be so amused by the painting.

That dog looks absolutely horrified by those grapes, she pointed out to Cara after she had more composure.

He looks personally attacked by the presence of them, Cara said as she nodded in agreement.

The two came across some gorgeous paintings, too. One that Cara loved was entitled *Adoration of the Child*. The painting showed baby Jesus in the manger with Mary and Joseph to his right and two children smiling in adoration down at him from in front of his straw bed. Cara didn't enjoy it particularly for the religious aspect or the joyful emotion displayed in the scene, but she was in awe of the mastery of lighting shown in the painting. The edge of the painting was full of shadows, but the small baby seemed to be the origin of the light that was emitted on the people surrounding him. Cara and Ellie spent almost their whole day at the museum, quickly leaving when they realized it was getting late in the evening and they still wanted to get to the Piazzale Michelangelo for the view of the Florence before the sun got too low in the sky.

Even though they felt they were in a hurry, Cara and Ellie stopped at a gelato place across the river on their walk to the Piazzale Michelangelo and ate their gelato slowly as they walked. Cara didn't let herself feel daunted by the incline up to the

Piazzale Michelangelo. They took the walk with the idea in mind that the view would once again be worth it. They finished their gelato halfway up, grateful they had gotten cones and didn't have cups and spoons to carry around until they found someplace to dispose of them. After she took in the breathtaking view, Cara noticed the writing all along the Piazzale's railing. Most of them looked like love notes left behind by couples who had journeyed up to see the view as a romantic venture. Cara could see, too, how the city before her could inspire such sentiment. She placed her elbows on the railing before her and admired the view as a gentle breeze swept through the air. She closed her eyes briefly at the feeling of happiness welling up inside her before she opened them again in order to savor the view. The sun was quickly setting, but it still shed enough light on the scene to make everything visible and picturesque. From up high, Cara could point out every major building and place Ellie and she had been to so far. Ellie was off in the corner of the terrace taking pictures of the city. As the sun set, lights came on around the city and made the view somehow even more magical. The lights of Ponte Vecchio and all along the river looked more and more like fairy lights as the light from the sun faded. The Duomo, though far off, seemed like a magical dome from another world. Cara once again felt like she was looking at something that couldn't possibly exist. It was quite literally an image one would spend money for on a postcard.

Cara joined Ellie and posed with her for pictures with the city as a backdrop. They tried to ignore the other tourists around them doing the same thing. After a couple dozen pictures, the two decided to check out the souvenir cart close by. They bought matching Firenze – the Italian name for Florence – t-shirts before walking back down the hill to

journey back into the city they had just been looking down upon. Going back into the city after such an experience felt like walking into a painting they had been admiring in a museum.

As Cara and Ellie walked to eat again at the restaurant they had eaten at the night before, Cara thought about how she almost didn't agree to this trip. She could remember so clearly the distress she felt just thinking about spending her inheritance and going traveling, especially without her father as she had always planned, but she couldn't conjure up that feeling anymore. She remembered feeling anxious and scared, but it seemed like a different person entirely who felt those things. If she could speak to the person she was before her trip and tell her how much fun she would have and how worth it the trip would be, her past self would think her absolutely insane; if she could say how happy and content she now felt, her past self would for sure have had her checked for some sort of mental problem. During Cara and Ellie's trip around Europe, Cara had seen more than she had ever thought she would be able to see. These last weeks were some of the best of her life, and Cara could scarcely believe how close she was to having not had them. The next day, Ellie and she would be going to the winery at which Gregory had once worked, and Cara was immensely excited for yet another adventure to add to her list.

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At the winery, everywhere she turned, Cara could see brilliant green. The sky above was a bright blue, though not as bright as the sky from the night before. Grape vines were visible as far as the eye could see. Ellie spoke with their tour guide briefly and

then dragged Cara over to stand in front of some of the vines for a picture. Cara couldn't have imagined she would be nervous to see Gregory's winery, but she was. Her weeks of learning about his life were officially coming to a close. Cara felt like the visit to the winery was a sort of ceremony.

Their tour started in the cellars. It was chilly inside, so Cara was glad she had brought a light jacket. Rows of barrels, which Ellie told her contained in-progress wine, filled the cellar's rooms. They got to see what looked like giant vats, too, but Cara found the wooden barrels to be more interesting than the metal tanks meant for filtering the wine.

As they were leaving, they were taken through a foyer containing pictures and a brief written history of the winery. Cara lingered in the room and looked at the pictures. All of the captions were in Italian, but she could identify the names and located one picture containing Gregory and Laretta. They were almost exactly as she had pictured them. Laretta was as beautiful as Gregory had described her and Gregory looked the part of an English gentleman. Ellie spoke with the tour guide for a minute and then came over to Cara to tell her what she had learned, a giant grin stretching across her face. Ellie quickly relayed what the tour guide had told her of Gregory and Laretta, slowing down when she got to the end in order to emphasize one surprising fact: Laretta was deaf. The intelligent and successful woman had been deaf. Cara stared wide-eyed at Ellie.

Deaf. The word played through Cara's mind on a loop. Reading Gregory's journal, Cara never would have known, even though there had been hints throughout now that she was focusing back on it. Gregory just saw more in Laretta than her deafness;

Gregory saw Laretta as a capable person, not as a person hindered by special needs.

Cara realized Ellie had been signing to her while thoughts were racing through her head.

– *isn't that fantastic?* The words caused the shock to fly out of Cara's mind, and her face split into a wide grin.

Laretta's deafness didn't define her! She was smart and amazing and – Ellie's hands clamped down over Cara's for a second.

– and she was just like you.

She was just like me. I—wow.

For some reason, in that moment, the fact finally sunk in with Cara that this was the end of Ellie and her trip. This was their last day in Europe before Cara would head back to the States and Ellie would go visit with her grandparents. Cara had successfully been on a journey through Europe. She had had fun and learned so, so much. She had seen things she had only seen previously in pictures online. She had, in a way, crushed her fears. She had changed. Cara felt like her trip had been a mountain she was climbing, and she had finally made it to the peak; the view was breathtaking, and she knew now she could accomplish anything. She no longer felt entirely reliant upon others and was therefore no longer a scared girl defined by her deafness and unwilling to attempt anything in a hearing world. Now, she knew she was ready to conquer the future.