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## Where Are You From: Essays on Finding Home

Georgia Knapp

Georgia College and State University, georgiaknapp10@gmail.com

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Where Are You From?  
Essays on Finding Home

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English and Rhetoric  
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In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Georgia Knapp  
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Where Are You From?  
Essays on Finding Home

by

Georgia E. Knapp

Approved:



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Professor Peter Selgin, Chair, Thesis Committee

4.21.2017

Date

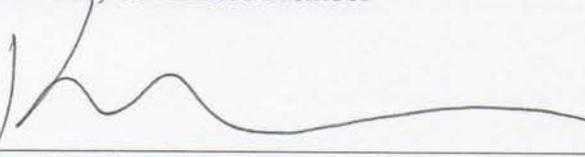


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Dr. Allen Gee, Committee Member

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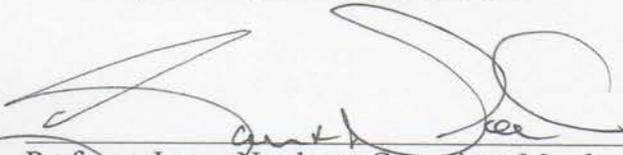


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Dr. Kerry Neville, Committee Member

4/21/2017

Date



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Professor Laura Newbern, Committee Member

Apr 21, 2017

Date

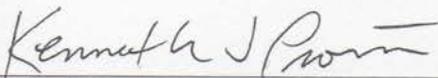


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Dr. Allen Gee, Graduate Coordinator

4/21/17

Date



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Kenneth Procter  
Dean, School of Liberal Arts & Sciences

4-21-2017

Date

*“Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend.”*

— Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*

## Acknowledgments

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Growing Up Gitmo.....	1
Tear Gas: A Love Story.....	12
Stormy Seas.....	25
The Dogs of Santorini.....	37
The Hunchback of the Blue Ridge.....	54
Where Are You From? .....	74
It Hurts to Look.....	87
Harriet and the City.....	98
Cloud People.....	105
Plunging into the Fissure.....	122
Solo Female Traveler.....	133

## Growing Up Gitmo

*[This essay is a work-in-progress.]*

*From beneath the daybed in my father's art studio I watch as my babysitter travels from the living room into the kitchen. "Georgia," she says, "where are youuuu?" I stifle a giggle and scoot closer to the wall. The daybed is the perfect vantage point for hide-and-go-seek. I can see the entrances to almost every room of the open layout house. Outside the windows, the Guantanamo Bay sky dims from dress blue to black.*

When people hear "Guantanamo Bay ("Gitmo") Naval Base" they think of torture and terrorists. Protesters yell for the base to be shutdown and politicians build or damage their reputation based on their opinions about Gitmo.

When I hear "Gitmo" I think of iguanas, snorkeling, and home. My Gitmo is full of thick mango trees, cool cerulean waters, and large climbable cliffs. Banana rats hide in the shade of the oak trees and there is one deer that lives in a fenced-in yard. Two schools serve all grades and during the rainy season people volunteer to barricade the classrooms with sandbags to protect them from flooding and mudslides. There is a McDonald's, a movie theatre, a horse stable, and a small strip-mall, which is primarily visited for the PX (Post Exchange). My Gitmo is a small island community where everyone knows each other, locals leave their doors unlocked, and civilians zip around on Honda scooters.

Before 2001, every military family wanted to live on Gitmo. The weather is hot without much humidity. The sea breeze cools the air, trailing an ever present salty, ocean scent. Beach access is plentiful, allowing people to laze about on beaches during even the shortest work break. The base is a paradox; it exudes a carefree, island vibe, conjuring images of Jamaica or Mexico, but with the constant reminder that the tropical paradise is a military stronghold. Barbed wire fences top the red cliffs surrounding the beaches. Occasionally, thin, tanned bodies press themselves against these fences, watching the swimmers below. Warships sit anchored in the harbor and watchtowers stand taller than any tree. Signs warn of mine fields just beyond the fences and there is always the knowledge that no one comes or goes without the U.S. government's permission.

*The sitter stands in the doorway of the kitchen. She scans the living room. The house is silent except for the slight rustle of palm fronds outside, and the usual low hum from the militarized area of the base. The sitter sighs and heads into my bedroom. Dad is at a Parent-Teacher meeting at the Guantanamo Bay Elementary School, a U.S. Department of Defense School (DoDDS), where he is the art teacher. I normally go to school with him and play with clay in his art room, but the last time he left me alone I touched the hot kiln. Now I have a babysitter, a decision I am sure my mother had something to do with after she received the overseas phone call, letting her know what her only child had done when left unsupervised.*

*Spread throughout the art studio, across from the daybed, is Dad's potters wheel, drafting table, and glass blowing equipment. The studio is at the back of our salmon-colored house. The wide room overlooks our backyard, where green grass abuts a hilly,*

*desert scrubland of cacti, brambly mesquite, and dry, yellowed bushes. The desert area beyond the grass is restricted. My friends and I think mines are buried out there.*

*I crawl army-style to the head of the bed. I keep my face turned towards the room. My blond hair is a beacon that gives me away in dark areas. I can see a sliver of the front door and the window that looks at our turquoise garage.*

*The babysitter comes out of my room. She puts her hand on her hips. "Georgia," she says, more sharply than before. I stay silent. I will not let her win.*

I moved to Gitmo in January of 1990, six months before I turned two years old. Military families are often split up with one parent working overseas and the other remaining in the States. My family was no different. I lived on Gitmo with my father, while my mother lived on St. Simons Island, Georgia, where she cared for an ailing parent. They had been stationed at the Royal Air Force (RAF) Lakenheath base in England when I was born. My father taught at the military high school and my mother served as an Air Force librarian. When my grandmother's health deteriorated, Mum moved back to the States and Dad took the closest DoDDS job he could find: Gitmo. The military provides on-base childcare, and since my father taught at the school I would attend, he and Mum believed living in Cuba was the best option for me. Dad and I stayed on Gitmo for the school year and we spent our summers and holidays on St. Simons Island.

On Gitmo, Dad and I went to the beach multiple times a week. Not a great swimmer himself, Dad would sit under one of the concrete pavilions reading an *Artisan* magazine while I dove into the ocean. Hovering over the coral and sea urchins, I could see everything. Happy Face Fish, named so because of their large eyes and giant curved

grins, swam close enough to graze my bare legs. The first time I traveled to the States the Walmart Happy Face logo reminded me of these fish.

Even as a child I knew I had the best of both worlds: traveling between island homes, living most of the year with a carefree father and having regular visits with a mother who treated each reunion as a celebration. I couldn't imagine anything better than life on Gitmo.

*The babysitter makes her fourth trek around the living room. She's desperate and looking in places where even my dog, Susie, can't fit—behind the couch that's pressed against the wall, beneath the side table, in a cabinet. "Come out, Georgia," she says. I don't respond. "Georgia, come out!" She marches into my room. Her arms swing stiffly. I lay my head on the crook of my elbow.*

*When Dad and I play hide-and-go-seek and he calls, "Where are youuu?" I cannot resist shouting, "Here!" Dad has explained over and over that the point of the game is to not reveal where you are hiding. Although the seeker may ask for your whereabouts you must remain quiet. I don't know why I have chosen tonight to stay quiet during hide-and-go-seek. Maybe I am annoyed at being left at home, when all I want to do is go to school with Dad and play in his art room. Maybe I'm mad because I know that once I am found, the babysitter will make me go to bed, even though Dad never enforces a bedtime. I don't know my reasoning for my stubborn silence. All I know is that I don't want the babysitter to win.*

When I visited Mum in the States, I marveled at the differences between the children in her neighborhood and myself. Stateside kids spun and kicked like the Power Rangers; I swung on branches and whipped Zs in the air imitating Zorro. I knew the names of U.S. bases, but not state capitals. I could identify Fidel Castro, but not George H.W. Bush. Kids on St. Simons had curfews and times when they could or could not be outside. They had to stay close to home, or be accompanied by an adult or older sibling. On Gitmo, parents rarely restricted their children to playing near the house or “stay where I can see you.” We only had to be home in time to watch the American flag lowered at sunset to the trumpet tune of “Taps at Twilight.” As military brats, we inherently knew to avoid places with uniformed guards or barbed wire—breaking these rules could get a kid sent back to the States.

My best friend Sam and I took constant advantage of the lack of adult supervision. We scaled the cliffs at the beach, usually unseen until we were too close to the barbed wire fences on top, and someone in camouflage would yell for us to get down. I am sure my father seldom knew where I was when school was out of session. Once, after watching *Mary Poppins*, I convinced Sam to climb the oak tree that shaded half of my house. At the top, we opened up two umbrellas and jumped. Sam ran home crying, while I stayed on the ground, angry that Mary Poppins’s treachery had caused me to ruin my umbrella.

Although I pitied the constraints kids in the States faced, I never realized that Gitmo kids had them, too. While I felt totally free, public temper-tantrums were silenced by the stern look of a gunner. Military brats who acted out were sent back to the States without any second chances. The truly bad kids got their entire families transferred. My

mother joked that I lived a “*Lord of the Flies* existence,” speaking both to the freedom I had and the foreboding sense that comes with living on any military base because, while the bases are protected and secure, they are also targets. Mixed with the scent of the surrounding Caribbean Sea also came the creeping sensation that an alarm could sound at any moment, sending everyone to seek cover.

In an attempt to normalize my childhood, my father decided that we should get a dog. We had a cat we brought from England and a hoard of feral felines that my dad fed. I stole two chicks from the horse stables that I tried to keep as pets, and a starfish that I collected from the ocean. Iguanas on the beach had grown so used to humans that you could almost get close enough to touch them. They basked in the sun, sitting poised and upright, while I stalked them, inching closer and closer, hoping to stroke their scaly backs. Furry banana rats perched in the trees outside our house, and Mum worried I would try to capture one of the rodents or an iguana. Dad hoped a dog would stop that from happening.

The animal shelter on the base did not have many dogs. At the end of a long row of cages there was a black Lab and a medium sized gray dog. The Lab jumped on me and I decided that I didn’t like it because it was twice my height. The gray dog looked wild. The word “dingo” popped into my head. She barked at Dad and me. She was perfect. I named her Susie.

The first day Susie met Sam she barked at him so much that he climbed onto our kitchen counter and screamed. I stood beside Susie as she barked. I tried to coax Sam down with a Capri-Sun. When Sam wouldn’t budge, I called Mum and told her that my “wild dingo dog” might eat Sam. That night, while Dad spoke to Mum on the phone, she

asked why I couldn't have chosen a tamer dog. I said Susie was like Cuba, and Cuba couldn't be tamed.

*I am getting bored beneath the daybed. The corner of my blue and white-checked quilt hangs tauntingly off the side of the bed. I want to grab it and build a nest, but moving the blanket will give me away.*

*I can see the sitter leaning against the kitchen counter. She talks to her mother on the wall phone. "I don't know where she is," she cries. She stretches the beige phone cord across the room. She flings open the front door. "Georgia!" she calls. Nothing. A spooked banana rat scurries up a palm tree. The babysitter walks back through the kitchen and stands in the living room entryway. "I don't know," she keeps saying into the phone. "She was here and she hid, but now she's gone." She paces while her mother talks. She stops and holds her hand over the receiver, "Georgia! Georgia, come out now!"*

*She isn't going to fool me with her ploy. I am in this to win.*

Soon after the night when I hid from my babysitter, everything changed. In the mid-90s, Cubans and Haitians fled their countries en masse—the Cubans escaping Castro, the Haitians escaping the bloodshed from the military overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—seeking refuge in the United States. Before reaching Florida, the U.S. Coast Guard picked up their rafts and brought them to Guantanamo Bay. On Gitmo the refugees remained in limbo. They couldn't be sent home because it was too dangerous, but they

also couldn't go to the U.S. The military sectioned off an area of the base. They built refugee camps. Civilians assumed they were temporary.

We knew little of what was happening. Battered rowboats and deflated rafts washed up on the beach from time to time. I approached one of these boats. Waves and weather had chipped away the cream-colored paint. Deep gashes sliced through the red rim. The pockmarked wood seemed more suited for driftwood than seafaring. Chunks of the hull were missing and a hole the size of two fists punched through the floorboards. I wanted to climb into the boat, but, like not walking outside the grassy area of my backyard, I knew I shouldn't. I felt I wasn't even supposed to be seeing the boat, and that Dad and I were breaking a rule by driving down the cliff as soon as he saw it. Dad took pictures of the vessel, for artwork and for documentation. Once he finished we got back into the car. We drove up the steep dirt road. I looked for the owners of the boat. I wondered, when they reached the shore, where did they go?

When the refugees in the camps began to outnumber the civilians on base, the U.S. government panicked. They believed there would be a coup, putting every Gitmo resident in danger. Barbed wire erected around everything: the schools, the library, the beach. When barbed wire went up around the McDonald's playground, civilians knew that something serious was looming.

*The sitter opens the front door and flings herself on her mother. Together they circle again: living room, my bedroom, Dad's bedroom, bathroom, living room, kitchen. The art studio is the only room without lights. I need a nightlight to sleep. Maybe the sitter thinks I would avoid such a dark area. She starts to sob and her mother soothes her.*

*“Children don’t just run away,” she says. “The gunners would notice a child walking around at night by herself.” The sitter mentions the minefield. Her mother says it’s too far away.*

*They go outside. I think about finding a new spot in the house and surprising them. Feet shuffle in the grass outside the sliding glass door of the studio. The corner of the white and blue blanket looks like it’s getting closer, but I must resist pulling it. I want to win! The shuffling subsides. If only I had known what a good spot this was. I would have brought my Simba and a snack.*

*The sitter is no longer crying. She sits on a chair in the living room, her head in her hands. Her mother answers the front door. Three men in dark blue jumpsuits enter the house. I don’t know the colors of the Power Rangers, but I know the navy color of the Coast Guard’s uniforms. One man stays at the front door and talks to the mother. The other two give the living room a quick scan. They look inside both bedrooms. I watch them take the same circuit as the sitter and her mother. Is the babysitter allowed to get extra seekers?*

*Two of the blue men follow the mother outside. The third man stays with the sitter and asks her questions.*

I had a birthday party at the horse stables on the day we learned the U.S. government had ordered a mandatory evacuation of Gitmo. Friends and I rode ponies and ate cake, while adults left the party one by one, each one crying when they returned.

The evacuation happened in stages. The government started with—they didn’t say this, but everyone knew it—the least important personnel and worked their way up. They

scheduled the Education Division to ship out on the third day. Only high-ranking officers would be left on base by the end of the week. No one was allowed to return. Dad and I had lived on Gitmo for four years, but some civilians had been there for over twenty years.

My mother happened to be on Gitmo during the evacuation. She had flown down for my birthday. The day after my party she helped pack up our pink house. I sat on the top tier of my bunk-bed while Mum held up stuffed toys. “Which ones stay and which ones go?” she asked. We separated the entire house like this: what stayed and what went. Dad closedown his art room at the school.

Two days after my party Dad brought Susie and our cat down to the docks. They flew to Virginia ahead of us. On the third day we finished packing what we could, pointed out valued items to the movers, and then boarded the launch boat that would take us to the plane bound for Norfolk.

The U.S. government held nothing back when it came to pampering the evacuees. Cheering crowds awaited us in Virginia, as if we were soldiers returning from war. Fruit baskets were thrust into hands, a red carpet was rolled out, a band played, and limos lined up outside the terminal. Nurses whisked children away to a play area. Adults filled out paperwork, signing away their Gitmo homes. Evacuees were given extra paid vacation time and a promise to be stationed wherever they wanted. Dad chose an elementary school at the Army base in Giessen, Germany.

When we touched down in Germany two weeks after my Gitmo birthday party, I thought the move was temporary. Just like spending my summers on St. Simons Island, I

figured it was just another trip and we would be back on Gitmo in time for school. I hadn't said goodbye to Sam. I had never even worn a winter coat.

I still thought that the move was temporary when I started school at Giessen Grundschule. I learned German. I complained about the cold weather and the itchy scarves that gave me cold sores. Dad and I lived off-base in a small village where our neighbors only knew one English word: "trash." I was restricted to playing in our fenced-in yard. I told my new classmates to not get used to me. I thought Dad and I would be leaving soon. I had no idea that I would never see the iguanas, banana rats, or my pink home ever again.

*The babysitter, her mother, and the officers are all standing in the kitchen when Dad walks through the front door. He is surprisingly calm to see so many people in his house. The sitter speaks rapidly. Her voice cracks and she starts to cry. Her mother puts an arm around her. An officer steps towards my father. He scribbles notes on a pad of paper as he and Dad speak. Dad leaves the blue man and steps into the living room. Hands on his hips, he looks over the large room just as everyone else has tonight.*

*"Georgia," he says, "you won."*

*I spring from beneath the bed. Never before have I won hide-and-go-seek. I run to Dad and he embraces me. The officers look at the babysitter and her mother, who stare with large round eyes. They remind me of the eyes of the Happy Face Fish.*

## Tear Gas: A Love Story

Most thirteen-year-old girls dream of getting married. I dreamed of being tear-gassed.

I first learned about tear gas from my mother. In the late '60s and '70s Mum was a flower child in Mexico City. During the height of Mexico's Dirty War she studied Art and Spanish at the Universidad de las Américas. Her conservative New Jersey family did not approve. My childhood swam with tales of my mother's life in Mexico: camping among Tulum's Mayan ruins, vagabond beach bums sleeping on her dining table, driving around cities late at night to skimp on hotel rooms, protesting oppressive regimes—her stories dazzled me like a fairytale.

Mum had long, straight blond hair. She wore billowing patchwork skirts and traditional white Mexican blouses embroidered with flowers colored like ripe poblano, habanero, and Devil's Tongue peppers. She mailed marijuana filled cardboard crosses to U.S. politicians, picketed against the Vietnam War, and marched alongside Mexican students in demonstrations against the state government. She missed the bloody 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, where thirty to three hundred student protesters, gathering peacefully to hear speeches, were ambushed and slaughtered by the military. The next day, her twentieth birthday, despite warnings from her school, Mum traveled to the site of the massacre.

Police tear-gassed my mother in the early 1970s. A crowd of Mexican students marched towards the city's iconic colonial square, the Zócalo. They called for fairer, democratic treatment of university students and teachers. Their voices rose like a flock of chachalaca birds, whose cries sound like cars colliding. Fearing another Tlatelolco Massacre, the Universidad de las Américas forbade its students from joining the protest. Mum went anyway.

The march didn't last long. Protesters were showered with tear gas and water cannons. Mum was close enough to campus to run into the safety of an administration building. She vomited and washed the burning chemicals from her eyes. It was as if her contacts had been dipped in acid. Decades later, recounting this story, she wondered if this had been the June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1971 student demonstration, in which 120 students were killed after the gas fell.

I wanted to be like my mother: rebellious, pro-peace/anti-war, etching my liberal beliefs across my face, and protesting for what I believed was right. My military brat childhood was spent in England, Cuba, and Germany. When, in my seventh year, my parents settled on St. Simons Island, Georgia, I went through culture shock. For the first time, I felt like I was in a foreign country. The hippies in my mother's Mexico stories protested against conservative and Republican beliefs. Flower Power was the handsome prince and conservative ideology was the dragon to be slayed. Now here we were, in a notch of the Bible Belt, the dragon's lair.

I rebelled against my conservative community—spouting my agnostic beliefs to anyone who could hear, plastering Gay Rights stickers on my Lisa Frank notebooks, and

making sure no one mistook me as a Southerner—but it wasn't enough. If I wanted to be a hippie like my mother, then my rebellion had to be loud, raucous, and disruptive. There needed to be picket signs, bullhorns, and body paint. There needed to be police in riot gear.

Most of all, there had to be tear gas. In my mind, nothing was more admirable than a hippie protesting against the conservative regime, and a hippie's Badge of Honor, the mark of a true protester, was having a tear gas canister chucked at your head.

I watched my first protest from inside a phone booth. It was April of 2002, my eighth grade year, the last year Mum and I figured I could academically afford to miss a few weeks of school. We were spending a month in France. Mum's Vermont cousins had swapped houses with a family in Tautavel, a small village of 900 people near the French-Spanish border. Our weeks were spent exploring Provence and the medieval cities of Avignon, Carcassonne, and Gordes. The trip ended with a few days in Paris.

Halfway through our stay in Tautavel, Mum's friend Linda joined us. In Paris, we stayed in the Left Bank, where Hemingway, Stein, Picasso, and Matisse, among other artists, had made their home and perfected their crafts. Their ghosts still trolled the narrow, bohemian streets. Alleyway breezes carried the faint clacking of a Corona 3 typewriter and the whiff of oil paints.

Mum, Linda, and I set out early to explore the City of Lights. The day was cloudless and cool. We stopped at a phone booth on a side street near our hotel. Mum said we should ring Dad, who had stayed home because of his teaching job. With the phone cradled between my cheek and shoulder, and Mum and Linda trying to find the

location of a touristy hop-on-hop-off bus on a map outside the booth, I dialed the code on my flimsy calling card. After a few rings Dad picked up.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Good. We’re going to take this sightseeing bus and maybe go to a museum.”

“The Louvre?”

“I think so.”

Just then I noticed that Mum and Linda had stopped looking at the map. Their gazes were fixed on something behind me. I turned to see a wave of people marching towards us, walking calmly but purposefully. The marchers at the front of the crowd held a banner stretched eight-people wide. Scrawled on it in black paint:

*Je suis honte d’être français!*

(I’m ashamed to be French!)

The previous evening, Round One of the presidential election results had come in. The final runoff had then president Jacques Chirac pitted against Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the ultra-conservative National Front Party. Le Pen had been criticized for being staunchly anti-immigration and an accused Holocaust denier—a crime in France. Now this man was steps away from the presidency. The protesters were having none of it.

“I think I need to go,” I said to my father and hung-up. I tried to push through the booth’s glass door, but Mum held it shut.

“Stay in there,” she said.

The protesters reminded me of a centipede: many legs moving one winding body. They approached the phone booth and parted. We were like a pebble dropped into their stream; they barely took notice of us. As the stony faces marched by I squinted into the

sun. I didn't know if the phone booth was insulated, but it was as if the volume of a YouTube video titled "Paris" had been turned off. Their footsteps on the cobblestones sounded like teeth crunching the stale heel of a baguette. Linda laughed nervously.

As the last of the protesters trickled around the phone booth Mum moved away from the door. I stepped into the cool air. By then the sea of people had receded up the street. We walked in the opposite direction, towards the hop-on-hop-off bus.

As we boarded the bus, the driver announced that the tour would be modified. "They're rioting at the Luxembourg Gardens," he said. "If you had plans to go there, you should do something else."

I looked at Mum and Linda. I wanted them to say, "Protesters be damned. We are going to the gardens!" They didn't.

I didn't encounter another protest until two years later when the G8 Summit came to my hometown. The G8 (Group of Eight) is a political retreat for the leaders of the world's top economies. Formed in 1975, the G8 primarily consists of France, the United States, Italy, Germany, Japan, Russia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. (Today is it the G7, having ousted Russia.) Once a year the leaders of these countries, and several invited countries, gather to discuss anything from the economic growth to the social stability of their respective countries.

Wherever it is hosted, the G8 draws protesters. The 27<sup>th</sup> Summit in Genoa, Italy, was especially contentious, with 200,000 activists rallied together to voice their anger at the foreign leaders, and night raids were carried out on schools harboring activists and

journalists. A battle ensued between law enforcement officers and civilians. Nearly 350 activists were arrested. A handful were killed.

Two years later, at the 29<sup>th</sup> Summit hosted by Chiraq in France, demonstrators clogged bridges and roadways with banners strung across traffic lanes. “*Ne Tirez pas,*” read one banner. Don't shoot. “*G8 Illegitime.*” Protesters were sprayed with rubber bullets and water cannons. Two activists tied themselves to a banner and repelled off a bridge in an attempt to hinder police action. “*Vous arretez ici ou vous tuez deux personnes,*” read their banner. Stop here or you will kill two people. Police cut the ropes anyway, plunging one activist sixty-five feet to his death.

Hoping to avoid similar scenes, the planners of the 30<sup>th</sup> G8 Summit sought a more secluded location, one not close to a major airport and with few access points. In June of 2004 they found the perfect spot: Sea Island, Georgia, neighbor to St. Simons Island.

St. Simons presented little opportunity for rioting. My classmates were conservative Bible Thumpers, but too nice to antagonize. By the time the G8 came to Georgia, my protesting history amounted to flipping off a pro-life rally in a Walmart parking lot.

The G8 Summit took place in two venues: The Cloister Resort on Sea Island, where the G8 leaders slept, and The Lodge, a Sea Island resort located on St. Simons. For three days George W. Bush, Jacques Chiraq, Vladimir Putin, Paul Martin, Gerhard Schröder, Silvio Berlusconi, Junichiro Koizumi, and Tony Blair would shuttle back and forth between The Cloister and The Lodge. Islanders debated leaving during the Summit. The chaos of G8s 27 – 29 worried our laidback island community. Two main roads

stretched across the island and one causeway led to and from the mainland. It wouldn't take much to wreak havoc.

I worked at a local bookstore, The BookMark, between The Cloister and The Lodge. Perched atop a barstool behind the register, I had the perfect vantage point for watching the G8 action. My parents and I lived near The Cloister. The prospect of riots within a few miles of my home exhilarated me. In a few days, less than two miles of roadway and a small bridge would separate me from my long-held dreams of tear gas martyrdom. When the white smoke blew my way, I'd be there.

My knowledge of tear gas was extremely limited. I knew it was used in war zones and riots. I'd seen its plume in journalistic photos and in war movies, where actors coughed and rubbed their watering eyes. It's name, I believed, proclaimed its only effect: to make victims cry. Had I done any research I would have learned that crying was the least of my worries.

Tear gas is a lachrymatory agent, deriving from the Latin word *lacrima*: tear. Lachrymators irritate the mucous membranes in the eyes, nose, mouth, and lungs. They cause the inhalants to cry, sneeze, cough, gasp, and lose general motor control. The effect is immediate. Use of a gas mask or respirator is the only prevention. Pepper spray, Mace, and the juice of a sliced onion are all in the lachrymator family. I cannot run the blade of a knife through a single onion without pressing the heels of my hands against my burning eyes. The pain lasts for several minutes; hot tears running down my face, sometimes mixing with the onions. Enveloped in a cloud of tear gas would be like swimming in a bowl of the freshly cut, glistening white bulbs.

Tear gas was first used in the fall of 1914, at the start of World War I, when it wafted over the trenches of Neuve Chapelle and Lorraine. Known as “the chemists’ war,” World War I gave birth to both tear gas and mustard gas—though “gas” was a misnomer, since they weren’t gases but chemicals in solid and liquid form chosen for their ability to stimulate the body’s pain-inducing nerves. Tear-gas grenades held ethyl bromoacetate, a chain of carbon, bromine, oxygen, and hydrogen with a particularly irritating effect on the eyes. 1.2 million people fell victim to the gas during WWI. In 1925, the Geneva Convention banned tear gas as “a weapon of war against the people.”

Treatment for tear gas exposure is varied. Much like the defensive spray of a skunk, the gas clings to you like a shadow. It wraps around your skin, clothes, and hair, leaving traces of its chemistry upon every person, animal, and object you touch. The only remedy is to strip bare, ridding your body of clothing and accessories—contact lenses especially. Activists employ First Aid kits with saline solutions. Exposed skin can be soothed with vinegar, canola oil, Vaseline, milk, and medicated ointment meant for burn victims. Left untreated, tear gas exposure can cause permanent blindness, lifelong respiratory infections, miscarriages, and death.

The best “treatment” is avoidance. Run fast and far from the spreading haze. Stay upwind.

The week before the G8 summit, National Guard troops erected cement barriers and barbed wire. They lined the roads like hedgerows. The Hampton Inn, which would accommodate dignitaries and ambassadors, reminded me of a military outpost. Humvees

in sand-colored camouflage appeared on the roads; warplanes and Black Hawk helicopters cruised the local airport.

I sat alone in The BookMark watching the armored vehicles motor past. I scrolled through articles detailing the protests in Italy and France. My eyes soaked up every photo of protesters restrained on the ground, police barricades with riot shields, and mobs of people marching and yelling. White tear gas smoke wafted in the background like dry ice from a fog machine.

From The BookMark I saw the roofs of the foreign leaders' black limousines. Small flags adorning each car waved over the parking lot shrubs. Military escorts flanked the convoy. Tanks rolled onto the airport and the Black Hawks periodically patrolled the sky. Photos of the G8 leaders walking on the beach littered the local newspaper. Secret Servicemen scoped out The BookMark for First Lady, and former librarian, Laura Bush. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* compared the Georgia islands to an episode of *Survivor*.

On the second night of the Summit, Mum picked me up from work. "We're going to Neptune Park," she said. "There's a protest."

We drove to the Village, the unofficial "downtown" of St. Simons. Neptune Park sits between the lighthouse and the pier. It is a grassy knoll where islanders listen to live jazz bands and watch Fourth of July fireworks. Two large octopi-limbed live oak trees shade a stony picnic area. The park looks at the channel between St. Simons and Jekyll Island, and the estuary into the Atlantic Ocean.

We parked near the public library. About fifty people milled about beneath the trees. Mum recognized some friends and we joined them at a cinderblock picnic table. A

few kids from my high school stood on the beach. They were the anarchist crowd—gages in their ears, an A scratched over a circle on their t-shirts, rings in their lips, metal studs sticking out from their belts, and leather cuffs. A news station from Jacksonville, Florida arrived. A blond man, who I recognized from TV, stood with a cameraman and boom operator. They tested their lights and sound. The anticipation surged through me like electricity. This was it: I was going to be tear-gassed.

The sun started to set. As the tide ebbed people wrote in the sand. They etched “No War” with a peace sign in the O. Hundreds of people sat and stood beneath the looming live oaks. The lamp of the lighthouse ignited. Its light traveled over the park and glided into the ocean. Someone passed out empty milk jugs. Half of the jug had been cut out. A candle stuck through the middle, protruding out the bottom to form a handle. People sprinkled sand in the plastic base.

The sun rested over the silhouette of the mainland. Everyone stood although no one told them to. Those with milk-jug-candles passed flames from wick to wick. As the sun slipped away, the belly of the live oak branches glowed with candlelight. No one spoke. The only sound came from the still receding waves. A few of the anarchists held milk-jug-candles. “No war” was barely visible in the sand. Everyone looked up at the trees or out at the ocean. Only the beam from the lighthouse moved.

Someone broke the silence with “Kum Ba Yah.” The song spread throughout the park. The voices rose up loud enough for Jekyll to hear.

*What the hell is this? I thought. This isn't a protest.*

Where were the picket signs? Where was the shouting? Where was the rock throwing? Mum stared at the black sea. The rambunctious hippie of her youth still

twinkled in her eyes, but the body had mellowed with age. Her friends, illuminated by their candles, looked serene and mournful as they sang. These were the somber news images I saw when mass amounts of people died. I wanted to throw my milk jug and shout “No war!” I wanted to hurl rocks in the air and hang a banner from the top of the lighthouse. I was aghast at the hundreds of people around me—Southerners, the descendants of rebels—and not a single one seeming agitated or ready to start rioting.

I looked to the anarchists on the beach. Surely they would be ready to start an anti-war chant. It was difficult to see them through the glow of so many lit candles. The beach was pitch-black. Tiny flames flickered near the shoreline. They swayed back and forth to “Kum Ba Yah.”

When each flame went out, everyone went home.

Ten years later, I walked down Chicago’s Magnificent Mile with a friend, who was visiting. Michigan Avenue buzzed with holiday shoppers. As if substituting for the unseasonably-absent snow, white lights sparkled in the sidewalk trees. We ducked into the Nordstrom Mall, hoping to take a shortcut to a lower street.

Since the G8 summit on Sea Island, I’d given up my dream of being tear-gassed. When I was twenty-four years old, a friend had chided me when I’d recounted my disappointment over the peaceful G8 vigil. “They don’t just throw a copy of *The Notebook* at you,” she’d said of tear gas. I laughed as if I agreed, but I still imagined myself only crying when sprayed by the lachrymatory agent. Months later I’d asked Mum to recount her tear gas experience. She made a retching sound over the phone.

“The worst experience of my life,” she said. When I confessed to her my desire to be tear-gassed, she responded flatly, “That is not a goal you should have.” Protesting for the glory of being in a protest, she went on to say, was not admirable.

“That’s why the protest during the G8 was so great,” she went on. “There was no fighting or yelling. We were just a group of people standing up for what we believed in.”

“I thought we’d gone there to riot.”

“You think I would have brought my child to a riot?”

Inside the Nordstrom my friend and I headed to the escalators. A cop stopped us. “Turn around,” he said. I explained that we were on our way to the lower street.

“Go back out the front,” he ordered. “We’re clearing this place out.”

We did as we were told. Shoppers walked briskly to the exit and shopkeepers closed their doors. A man in a Guy Fawkes mask lumbered past us. The front of the building was mobbed. We’d assumed the crowd was Christmas shoppers, but now we heard the shouting and saw people without purchases. A policeman argued with a young woman. Guys and girls, about the same age as me, sat on the ground, their hands behind their backs. I looked for the man in the Guy Fawkes mask.

Another cop approached. “You ladies need to leave the building,” he said. His eyes searched behind us for stragglers. “Anyone left in the building will be arrested.”

At the word *arrested* my ears lifted. This was a protest.

The crowd outside had doubled. Police SUVs parked along the curb. Black Lives Matter posters flew in the air. Everything was how I had imagined it: the chaos, the disgruntled cops contrasted against impassioned demonstrators, and a cause worthy of an arrest.

Cops and activists stood nose-to-nose. I felt the familiar impulse to throw myself into the fray. I still wanted to be in a protest. I still wanted to be like my mother. I turned to my friend, but she wasn't beside me. She had weaved her way to a staircase that led to the lower street. Her dark brown eyes met mine before she disappeared below the concrete.

My mother's words echoed in my head: *We were just a group of people standing up for what we believed in.*

Following my friend, I made my way through the demonstrators. As we linked arms on the lower street, and sounds of protesters drifted down on us, I felt like my mother—not the riotous hippie-mother from Mexico, but the one who'd kept her child safe in a Parisian phone booth, and brought that same child to a peaceful anti-war vigil. My mother would not endanger someone. I would not leave my friend. There would always be other causes, other protests. There would be more tear gas.

## Stormy Seas

The ferry stood on its stern, the hull at a severe angle to the North Sea. My one hand clutched the safety bar; the other cradled the toilet's rim. The ferry crested another wave, then plunged forward again. I took advantage of the downward momentum to sit up on my knees, my hand braced against the toilet tank. Like a car slamming into a tree the bow struck the next wave. As the ship leveled off, rocking in the valley of waves, I threw up again. I pressed my forehead to the cool, white porcelain and fought back tears. As the boat climbed the next wave I watched the bile slosh against the side of the bowl.

Eighteen hours earlier, eleven of my fellow Kalamazoo College students and I stood by the gangway as the NorthLink ferry docked in Lerwick. At seven a.m. the sun still hadn't risen. South of the port a cluster of buildings ranging in hues of light and dark gray stood against the gloomy sky. To the north a two-lane highway wound through rolling hills. During our crossing from Aberdeen we joined regular commuters, oilrig workers, and salesmen. In Lerwick the others all disembarked in search of their parked cars. We stood and watched as lorries drove empty trailers—to be filled with sheep on the trip back to Aberdeen—out of the ferry's hull. We were the only tourists.

Lerwick is the main port of the Shetland Islands. By boat or by plane are the only ways to get to the islands. My friends and I had just started our study abroad semester at the University of Aberdeen. We'd lived in Scotland only three weeks when I proposed

the trip to Lerwick. It was October, the wind-down to the tourist season. Transportation to the Shetlands was scarce. Per my advice, my friends and I boarded a ferry in Aberdeen that took us on a twelve-hour overnight journey across the North Sea. Once in Lerwick we had twelve hours to explore the area before boarding a return ship to Aberdeen.

I was born in England. My parents were civilians working for the U.S. Department of Defense: my father as a high school art teacher and my mother as a librarian. I spent the first two years of my life in the UK before my father transferred to Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. I saw study abroad as a chance to rediscover my birth country. I planned to immerse myself in the English and Scottish cultures. In one month I had already visited Loch Ness, Inverness, and had spent the previous weekend hiking to Dunnottar Castle on the coast of Stonehaven, an hour's train ride from Aberdeen and birthplace of the fried Mars bar.

I was drawn to the Shetland Islands for their seclusion. 110 miles north of Scotland, they are the UK's northernmost settlement. Nearly one hundred islands make up the Shetlands. Only sixteen are inhabited. The population teeters around 22,000. More than half live near Lerwick. Shetlanders were described as "a fiercely independent and self-reliant bunch" in Lonely Planet's Top 10 Regions for 2011. Mountainous waves and sharp gales across the North Sea hinder the importation of goods.

Islands like the Shetlands enticed me. The Aran Islands, American Samoa, Easter Island—I was enthralled by islands that had to fend for themselves. My parents settled on an island on the coast of Georgia when they left the military. Our island was overdeveloped, and I envied islanders whose homes were largely untouched by

civilization. Their self-sufficient, resourceful communities lured me like other travelers would be drawn to a ritzy foreign city.

The week before the trip I got a sore throat. It started as a scratch and escalated into a searing pain that kept me from eating and eventually left me nearly voiceless. Over-the-counter drugs did nothing. My British flatmate recommended tablets that numbed the inside of my mouth. They turned my tongue onyx. My Finnish flatmate gave me a handful of Echinacea. I subsisted on orange squash, orange juice, soup, and tea. I coughed up green phlegm until my throat felt raw. At the end of the week I was physically and mentally exhausted, but determined to travel to the Shetland Islands.

The day we left for Lerwick I went to an Immediate Care clinic and the Emergency Room. One look at my passport and I was turned away from both places. Each nurse asked for my National Health Services card. I scribbled notes to the ER nurse explaining that I was only an American. Right before I was born, the British government stopped granting dual citizenship to the children of legally settled parents. Regardless, she sent me away. I bought a one hundred-capsule bottle of Echinacea. Five hours later my friends and I boarded the NorthLink overnight ferry bound for the Shetland Islands.

Lerwick was painted pewter. The sun rose. A layer of silver clouds shielded it. A banner strung between two buildings read “Welcome to the Shetland Islands!” We peered into shop windows. Woolly Shetland sweaters, plush Viking dolls, plaid Gatsby hats, and sheep knickknacks lined the windows and shelves. Notes posted on doors stated that most businesses were closed for the season or had severely limited hours. We spied a woman inside the closed Visitor Center. She greeted us warmly as we opened the unlocked door.

I wanted to see puffins on the Shetland Islands. Like the siren draw of secluded islands, puffins seemed mystic in their rarity. They were creatures you only saw in Disney cartoons or in faraway places like Greenland, Siberia, or Maine. Puffins had been one of my selling points when proposing the thirty-six hour Shetland journey to my college friends.

“I’m afraid they’re all gone,” the woman said.

“Gone?” I shouted, but it came out a whisper.

“For the season. They left in August.”

A 24x36 glossy photo of a nesting puffin loomed over the counter. “Where did they go?”

“South, I presume. They head to warmer climates.”

Everyone was quiet. Shops were closed, pubs had limited hours, and now the puffins were gone. I had been so excited to get to the islands that it never crossed my mind that the Shetlands would have an off-season. Weren’t the seasons just cold, more cold, and even colder? The woman gave us maps and suggested some seaside ruins. Lerwick’s hostel was closed until March, she reminded us, so don’t miss the ferry back to Aberdeen. Some shops and pubs would open at ten a.m. We thanked her for the information and left. I took a picture of the puffin poster, standing close to give the illusion of being a real-life puffin, and not a photograph of a photograph.

We walked south. We barely made it half a mile before a storm rolled in. Driving rain, winds, and sleet caused us to seek shelter. Crouched behind a seaside stonewall, we were like soldiers in a foxhole. Regular ferry commuters warned us about the storm.

Seemingly unusual for the North Sea, they called it a Tropical Storm, and it barreled across the North Atlantic. “It’s gonna be shite weather,” the ship’s bartender predicted.

Soaked by the rain above us and waves splashing behind, we ran up a steep hill, looking for an open building. I pulled on the doors of a Masonic temple. A friend pointed at the *No Women Permitted* sign. We found refuge in a small pub that opened for breakfast. A crackling fireplace warmed our hands and dried our clothes. Everyone ordered tea or coffee, and snacked on our stash of granola bars and apples. Lemon tea ran down my throat like yogurt through cheesecloth. The bottle of Echinacea bulged in my peacoat pocket. I washed several of the green, chalky tablets down with the tea.

I hadn’t told anyone about how sick I was. When I skipped class to go to the hospital, I told Anna, my roommate from Kalamazoo, that I was running errands before the trip. My Aberdeen flatmates thought I had a cold. As a military brat and an only child, I was used to taking care of myself. I made friends easily when my parents and I traveled for the military. I was upbeat and positive, rarely burdening others with my problems. *Soldier on* was my motto. Years of stern military nurses taught me not to complain unless I was dying.

We split into groups for the rest of the day. One group accepted a stranger’s offer to drive them to the seaside ruins. Another went shopping. My group wandered around the town. Falling ice needles drove us into the Lerwick Community Center, where the daycare was housed. “You’ve picked a bad time to come,” a counselor told us. “This is the worst weather we’ve seen in years.”

They let us sit in the craft area. The kids played sports in the gymnasium. Chuck, K’tanaw, and Anna ate and drank the available shortbread cookies and lemonade. I

washed two more Echinacea tablets down with a Styrofoam cup of hot water. We colored on construction paper until the raining chunks of ice lightened into snow.

We reconnected with the rest of our Kalamazoo group an hour before we were to board the ferry back to Aberdeen. No one planned to meet at the Shetland Museum, but at six p.m. it was the only building open. The museum attendants couldn't believe we made the trek in October.

“Why not wait until spring?” a woman asked. “You'd see lots more then. The hostel would be open, and the puffins mating.”

“Back at school,” I said, speaking as little as possible. “Back in the States.”

“That's a shame. Nasty weather we've had, aye.”

My lungs were like wet sandbags. The wind and rain battering the museum windows muffled my rasping breaths. I dry swallowed more Echinacea and walked around the museum with Anna. Anna likes to read every informational sign in a museum. After a few exhibits, I built a nest out of everyone's coats and bags, and lay down. We would board the ferry in an hour. As much as I had wanted to come to the Shetland Islands, now I wanted to leave.

The museum's floor-to-ceiling windows looked at the harbor. Hail pelted the gunmetal water, like schools of fish wrestling at the surface. I watched a black dog jump into the cold, choppy waters. Its head sank immediately. I looked for the owner. Who could be so careless to let their dog play in such rough seas? When the dog didn't resurface I panicked.

Chuck noticed my alarm. “What's wrong?” he asked.

I pointed to the water. “There’s a dog,” I said, “someone must have thrown something into the water and it hasn’t come back up.”

“What was it?”

“A black Lab.”

We stared at the water, peering through the condensation covering the windows. A large mass floated to the surface. “It’s dead,” I said, tears welling. My hand covered my mouth. “The dog is dead.”

Chuck put his hand on my shoulder. I scanned for the owner. I was ready to fulfill the stereotype of the loud, rude American. Chuck squeezed my shoulder and pointed at the water. The dog’s head bobbed. Then it was gone. Then it reappeared. *This is grotesque*, I thought. The head continued to bob. I couldn’t look away. “It’s a seal!” Chuck exclaimed. The animal surfaced again and turned on its back. The speckled body rolled and exposed its bloated belly to the sharp tickle of the rain.

My head swam. I had so clearly seen a black Labrador jump into the water. The fatigue was getting to me. I popped three more Echinacea and buried myself in my peacoat and wool scarf.

Back on the boat we dried our clothing under hand dryers in the bathrooms. Some had planned ahead and brought a spare change of clothes. I had purchased a traditional wooly Shetland sweater, which I donned for warmth. All eleven of us sat in the dining area. We watched until Lerwick was a toothpick-sized sliver. No longer in the sight of any land, the ferry rose and fell dramatically in the open waters. The regular commuters dispersed to claim lounge couches and chairs for the night. “This will be a rough ride,”

one commuter warned. We were heading straight through the tropical storm. “You’ll want to lay down now.”

Heeding the warning, we spread out among the ship. Our overnight ferry tickets included “sleeper seats,” but these were airline-esque chairs that didn’t recline. Anna, K’tanaw, Cathy, and I walked to the bow. The ferry thrashed violently. As it rose, we shuffled as fast as we could, keeping near the walls, handrails, and bolted-down decorative photos. We clung to whatever was closest as the boat fell. Finally we found a vacant lounge and bedded down for the night. K’tanaw curled up on a loveseat. Anna and Cathy shared a wraparound couch. I stretched out foot-to-foot with an older Scottish man on a long couch beneath the bow’s windows.

Anna, Cathy, and K’tanaw fell asleep immediately. The Scottish man tossed and turned periodically. I stared at the windows, watching the North Sea consume the entire bow every time we crested a wave. The boat shook like a torpedo hit. I wondered whether we were going to survive.

I fished two Echinacea tablets out of my backpack. I chased them painfully with cold, bottled water. The ship careened backwards. I shoved my hand in between the plastic cushions to keep from sliding into the Scottish man. We fell over the wave and plummeted to the sea again. The crash shook the boat and my stomach. I realized I was going to be sick. I ran as steadily as possible to the nearby handicapped bathroom. The door locked behind me, I proceeded to puke the water and tea I’d consumed in the past hour.

Three hours later, I was still in the bathroom. On the ground, face collapsed on top of the toilet seat, I knew this wasn't seasickness. I had puked consistently every fifteen minutes. The bile was nearly translucent. Nothing was left in my stomach. The boat lifted sharply. I worried I would see blood soon.

My knees ached from being bent so long. My chest throbbed as if it had been punched. I thought about crawling to the door, pulling myself upright, and rousing one of my friends. K'tanaw had been an RA back at Kalamazoo. Surely she was used to sitting with people while they were sick. Anna and I had lived together, and I had sat with her, rubbing her back as she retched up too much wine. Seeking their help, however, felt foreign to me. Having moved around so much, I was accustomed to fending for myself. *Fiercely independent*: that was how two counselors and an ex-boyfriend described me. I wore the words like a badge of honor.

At four a.m. there was a knock at the door. *Anna?* I thought. I responded like answering a role-call. "Here."

"Are ye okay in there, lass?" A deep Scottish brogue. It was the man from the couch. He was a regular commuter—a native Shetlander, who worked on an oilrig near Aberdeen. He noticed when I left the couch and worried when I didn't return.

"I'm fine," I said, steadfast on the floor.

"Ye've been gone a long time."

"I'm not used to the waves," I lied. "I've never been on a boat."

It took several assurances, but he finally returned to the couch. I flushed the toilet and squeezed myself into the space between the porcelain bowl and the wall. I pushed until it felt like an embrace. *Go get my friends*, I wanted to say to the man. *Tell them I*

*need help.* I let a few tears roll down my cheeks. I thought about the Shetland Islanders and how they must be huddled in their homes, also weathering the storm. *Soldier on,* I told myself. If I wasn't dying then I was fine, and I was pretty sure I wasn't dying.

Another sharp knock came at five a.m., followed by the sound of a key slipping into the lock. Two security men opened the door. One looked like James McAvoy, although, I didn't trust my eyes after the black Lab. "Are you alright, miss?" James McAvoy asked. I righted myself, trying to look less disheveled. "Yes, I'm just seasick," I said. "I'm not used to the waves."

"People often hit their head in the bathroom," non-James McAvoy explained. "You're sure you're alright?"

I nodded. *I think I'm dying,* I screamed inside my head. *I am going to puke to death and then my friends are going to die when this boat finally sinks.* I stayed on the ground, afraid my legs wouldn't support me if I stood. The guards assured me we would be out of the storm soon. "It'll be calmer out of open waters," James McAvoy said. "Should only be another hour."

Dawn broke and the boat rocked gently as I stumbled out of the bathroom, five hours after first locking myself inside. I collapsed onto the couch with the snoozing Scotsman once more. I was out for a solid hour before Anna shook me awake.

Off the boat in Aberdeen, we walked the two and a half miles from the harbor back to our dormitories. Each breath felt like I'd punctured a lung and my vision spun. I was still fairly confident I wasn't going to die. I smiled and tried to laugh as everyone talked about how weird it was to be on solid ground again.

At the dorms, I trudged straight to my room, and collapsed onto my bed. Fully clothed, I covered myself with my duvet. I pulled the Echinacea bottle out of my pocket and dumped the last two pills into my hand. I couldn't believe I had consumed all one hundred pills in less than forty-eight hours. I dry swallowed the tablets and shut my eyes. Within minutes I was up and retching into my bedroom sink. The bile was clear. I gasped for breath and stared at myself in the mirror. *I am dying*, I thought. *I'm dying and I don't know how to get help*. I gripped the sink. The two regurgitated artichoke colored pills stared up at me like eyes. One had just started to dissolve before it left my stomach. I grabbed the bottle and looked for a dosage limit. Nothing. I pulled out my laptop. A quick Internet search told me everything: "Take two tablets three times daily. Consuming more Echinacea...can cause nausea and upset stomach."

I fell back into bed. Now I knew I wasn't going to die. I would never know if I had poisoned myself with the herbal remedy, or if the puking was tied to my original illness. Whatever the cause, I thought about the story I would tell everyone the next day. About how I had puked consistently for five hours while they slept. About the Scotsman and the two security guards who had checked on me. I would even tell them about going to the hospital before we left for Lerwick.

What I wouldn't tell them was how the extended, violent vomiting strained my pectoral muscles so much that it hurt to breathe for a week. I wouldn't tell them that I wished someone besides strangers had checked on me. I wouldn't tell them that a part of me sincerely believed I was going to die that night. And I certainly wouldn't tell them how lonely I felt huddled in the bathroom beneath the fluorescent lights. There was no one to blame, but myself. No one thought to check on me because no one knew how sick

I was. The seclusion and self-reliance of the Shetland Islanders drew me like a siren's song. I wasn't a Shetlander, though. I didn't have to only rely on myself.

The sensation of being back on the ship coursed through my body. My bed seemed to undulate on top of the carpet. I pulled the duvet over my head and tried to find a position that didn't hurt my chest. When I did, I rode the waves until I fell asleep.

## The Dogs of Santorini

The honk of the car makes us jump. A sporty black Peugeot speeds past. It honks again.

A man sticks his head out the window and yells, “Hey, Sexy!”

“Fuck you!” Anna flips them off.

I applaud her outburst. Normally she keeps her anger bottled up, leaving me to do the talking in precarious situations. The brake lights of the Peugeot flare with bright red eyes. The tires screech as the car does a fast U-turn. The car speeds towards us. I grab Anna and run.

We’re on the outskirts of Santorini, walking back to our hostel. Only the city centers have streetlights, and Anna and I were using the lights from our cell phones to see the ground. Now we run blindly, heading for one of the eucalyptus trees that line the narrow two-lane road. The tree won’t obscure us, but at least it will protect us from being run over.

The car speeds by and does another U-turn. The men are no longer speaking English, but it’s clear that they’re angry. Anna and I stay behind the tree until the car peels away once more.

When we’re sure the car is gone we go back to the road, walking quickly and more cautiously. “Sorry,” Anna says, “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Are you kidding me?” I flip my cell phone open to light the ground. “Fuck them. We should have thrown a rock.”

It’s only our second day on Santorini, but it’s our sixth day of learning how hard it is to travel alone as women. Greece is the first stop on our three-week long backpacking trek across Europe. Normally we spend the month of February battling lake-effect snow at our college in Michigan, but this is our junior year—our study abroad year. Anna and I just finished living and studying in Aberdeen, Scotland for six months. Our exams in Scotland concluded in January, but we don’t have to return to Michigan until the beginning of Spring Quarter in April.

Anna’s outburst tonight reflects how exhausted we are at deflecting unwanted attention from men. My own outburst happened a few days ago when a man noticeably followed us outside the University of Athens. I told him to get lost, but he took my words as an invitation. When he tried to put his arms around us, Anna and I ducked into a nearby coffee shop. The man paced outside the door until we pointed him out to a barista.

At first I was flattered by the catcalls. In the States, my plus-sized figure never earned me many dates. Men rarely paid attention to me and I constantly compared myself to the svelte women on magazine covers and in movies. In Athens, men showered me with praise and made it clear that they weren’t just talking to my Size Six friend. The flattery lessened as the men turned aggressive. Groups of guys began to approach us on the street, standing inches away, asking us to drinks. Several times a pack of men jogged along the side of a bus, whistling and yelling at Anna and me, waiting for us to get off.

We wondered what we were doing to make these men so persistent. As backpackers, we walked around in loose jeans, solid colored t-shirts, and the occasional

cardigan or scarf, mostly purchased in Scotland. George W. Bush was not favored abroad and we followed our Michigan school's advise on How Not to Look Like an American: no NorthFace fleece jackets, shirts with logos across the chest, or sweat pants with words across the butt or down the thigh. If anyone asked, Anna and I said we were from Canada. It wasn't until we were looking for the National Archaeological Museum that we noticed a startling pattern: every billboard and magazine ad featured blond, pale, blue-eyed women. We realized that having these same features, a camouflaging complexion in the Alpine and British countries, suddenly made us anomalies near the Mediterranean.

For four days we kept our eyes on the ground, pretending we couldn't hear or understand the men around us. If one got too close, I spouted German phrases, hoping a language barrier would provide a physical blockade. We stayed close to other visitors and traveled via a touristy Hop-On-Hop-Off bus. At night we ate near our hostel. When we boarded the ferry to Santorini, we weren't sorry to say goodbye to Athens. The knot in my chest loosened as the waves of the Aegean Sea brought us further and further away from the Greek capital and closer to the tiny volcanic island. We thought our experience in Athens was an anomaly and not a precursor for the whole trip.

The black Peugeot tonight, however, proves we still cannot let our guard down.

After two days on the island we feel we have exhausted all there is to do. Santorini's 15,000+ population is halved in the winter months, and Anna and I have seen more stray dogs (termed "free dogs" by the locals) than people. In Fira, the capital, there is one open grocery store, a gyro stand, two jewelry shops, and a handful of hotels. It's eight a.m. and we are boarding a bus heading to Oía, a small village on the northwestern tip of

Santorini's crescent moon shape. My guidebook, *Europe on a Shoestring*, says that Oía is active year-round. It also says the town has "the best sunset in all of Greece." Anna and I just hope they have more to eat than gyros.

The ride takes about forty minutes. We step off the bus and shield our eyes from the cloudless sky. Oía looks just like Fira: narrow stone-slab streets line the walkways between domed white buildings. Thick white plaster outlines each stone on the ground, reminding me of the illustrations in Dr. Seuss books. A few of the spherical roofs are royal blue, signifying the Greek Orthodox churches.

Two people get off the bus with us. It's quiet except for the strong breeze and hum of the bus engine. There's a convenience store across from the bus stop. It's closed. Anna looks at me. Her mouth is a thin line. "Maybe they don't open until ten," I suggest. It's nine a.m. The sun will not set for eleven hours. The next bus will come an hour after that. As our only ride back to Fira pulls away we question the validity of my guidebook. The two passengers who got off with us are already gone. We are alone in the open cul-de-sac.

There is barking in the distance. We turn just in time to see three dogs bounding around a corner. Like heat-seeking missiles they head straight for us and halt before crashing into our legs. "Again?" Anna exclaims.

I squat down and open my arms, "Hi, cuties!"

Three wet noses are stuck in my face. The dogs shake with excitement, their mouths open and panting. Anna hasn't figured out that my enthusiastic greeting is what attracts every stray canine on the island to us. Athens had free dogs too, but the canines had more tourists to choose from for love and attention.

The trio of dogs follows us to the main street on the cliff's edge. We pick up two more dogs along the way, naming them as we go: a large German shepherd-looking dog with expressive eyebrows and a shiny black stripe I name Carlos; a white and gray speckled dog with droopy ears we name Jocko; a short, stout tan dog with pointy ears and drool hanging from her mouth we name Erma; and two nimble black dogs that are nearly identical we name Snow Foot, for his white paws, and Jack, who has a white diamond on his chest.

The shops and homes are boarded up. The white of the buildings and wall lining the main street are blinding in the sunlight. Beneath the wall are five rows of homes and a small path zigzagging down the cliff. I do not see any signs of life and the only sound comes from the crashing waves one hundred meters below. The streets remind me of a Western ghost town. Fira at least had the occasional passing car. These narrow streets let through nothing bigger than a bicycle. An eerie silence hangs in the air.

I turn a corner and step on a mound of fur. I leap backwards, stupidly thinking I've stepped on a person. A head like a lion, with a mane to match, looks at me. This dog is huge, like a Tibetan mastiff. "Hey, cutie," I say. His tail starts to wag. He picks himself up sleepily and stands next to my legs, craning his neck to look at my face. His head is level with my waist.

Anna sighs the moment she sees the new dog. The five we've already attracted stay crowded behind her legs. "What should we call him?" I ask, petting the top of his fluffy head. I think Aslan may be appropriate, but I've named four of the five dogs so far. Anna won't admit it, but she likes having the dogs around as much as I do. She named the pack of four from yesterday The Beatles.

“He looks like my uncle,” Anna says, “we should call him Charlie.”

Anna sprawls on a stonewall sunning her chest and face. The dogs are spread out on the ground. We are exhausted from walking and regret not bringing granola bars. There is even less open in Oía than there was in Fira. We have taken photos of ourselves, the dogs, us with the dogs, the buildings, us with the buildings, the buildings with the dogs, etc. Yesterday we would have grumbled at the thought of another gyro; now we would each inhale two.

*Europe on a Shoestring* says that Castle Point is the prime location for watching the sunset. It’s still six hours before the sky will darken. From Castle Point we can see the full inner curve of Santorini. I zoom my camera as far as the lens can go and look at the paths in Fira where Anna and I walked yesterday. The volcano across the channel is not the stereotypical cone-shape that you always see on TV. It’s flat like an isosceles trapezoid. I can’t see where the lava would come out.

No one is walking towards the Point so I lie down too. I start to drift off when suddenly a shadow covers my face. I bolt up, smacking my head into the chin of a new dog. He is smaller than our other dogs, longhaired and white with black spots. He leans forward to lick my face. I scratch his ears when something moving just beyond the walls of Castle Point catches my eye. None of the dogs stir as a parka-clad person climbs to the top of the steps and looks at me.

The man puts his hood down and smiles. He has a traditional Mediterranean look: thick curly black hair, dark eyes, olive skin. He’s handsomer than many of the men

who've pestered us, but that doesn't mean anything. I look at our dogs. Only the one beside me is awake. He sits and pants, not even looking the intruder.

"It is just you two and all the dogs of the island," the man says.

"They really like us."

"So it seems."

Charlie sits up. He wags his tail when the man pats him on the head. *Traitor*, I think.

"You two are visiting?"

"Yes." I stare at Anna, willing her to wake-up.

"You did not pick the best time to come to Thira, eh?" He uses the Greek name for Santorini.

"We didn't know the island had an off-season."

"It is very cold." He points to my bare arms. "You do not seem to think so." I tell him about spending the past few months in Scotland. Sixty degrees and sunny feels like summer. The words 'United Kingdom' rouse Anna. She props herself on her elbows and looks from me to Parka Man.

"I run a bookstore," the man says, pointing away from Castle Point, "you two should come by since there is nothing else open. We have a nice selection." I thank him and tell him we may stop by. After petting Charlie on the head once more Parka Man puts his hood up and leaves. Anna looks at me.

"Thanks for sleeping through that."

"You should have kicked me." Anna notices the new dog and raises her eyebrows.

“Spotty Dog,” I say.

There are still five hours until sunset.

“You know,” I say, “I don’t think that guy was hitting on us.”

“We must be losing our touch.”

Charlie’s front paw is frozen mid-air above a stone step. He and Carlos cock their heads. “You’re not allowed in the store,” I explain. Snow Foot stands on the ledge above the staircase, his feet are parallel to my eyes. He lowers his head to peer into the store. Anna waits for me at the threshold. “Just wait out here,” I say, “we won’t be long.” Carlos snorts. He turns and walks across the narrow pathway and sits with Jocko and Spotty Dog. Jack pees on a fountain that is no longer running. Charlie looks from me to the store, paw still in mid-step. Finally, he, too, turns and joins the rest of the pack. They lounge in a row, backs leaning against yet another shop that says CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. It’s eerie how human our pack acts.

The bookstore is homier than I expected. Shelves and support beams look as though they’re made of driftwood, and the books are old and worn. The room smells of dust and ink. Anna scans titles in the Travel section. A man comes out of a doorway behind the counter. In a fitted black t-shirt, I barely recognize him as Parka Man.

“You came!” he exclaims. “Where are your friends?” I point out the door. The pack remains unmoved except for Charlie, whose head pokes around the doorframe. I tell him to go back up the stairs, but Parka Man reaches behind the counter and pulls out a small box of treats. “It is okay,” he says, “they stop by here all the time.” He gives Charlie a biscuit. “Though there are usually not so many at once,” he says, grabbing a

handful and placing the goodies at the top of the stairs. Anna and I learned in Fira that the locals take care of the free dogs. An island vet vaccinates and fixes most of the canines and many shops put out bowls of water and food.

We are browsing the large Poetry section when another man appears. He looks almost identical to Parka Man. They talk to each other in a language that does not sound Greek. Anna covers her mouth with a book of French poems. “Should we leave?” she whispers. Something about no longer outnumbering Parka Man puts us on edge. I look out the door where our dogs are still milling about. I play a scenario in my head where Anna and I run to the door, but are blocked by Parka and his twin. Will the dogs just sit and watch or will they run to our rescue?

“Would you two like some tea?”

Parka’s question interrupts my daydream. Anna’s face is in her book, but her eyes look at me. My mind grapples between being polite and still feeling uneasy. Before either side can make a strong argument “Sure, thank you,” comes out of my mouth. Parka smiles and disappears into a backroom with his twin. Anna puts the book down. “We’re staying for tea?”

“Looks like it.”

“Do you think that’s okay?”

“It’s done now. We can’t just leave.”

Anna looks at the book in her hands. It’s obvious she’s anxious. I am too and now I feel responsible for committing us to an extra half hour with these men. The knot in my chest from Athens begins to tighten.

“It’ll be fine,” I assure Anna (and myself). “They seem nice enough. And Parka Man didn’t even hit on us earlier.” She nods, but her eyebrows remain pinched. I worry that my trust in an obviously dog-friendly person has led to some grave misjudgment.

We wander around the shop waiting for the guys to return. Anna has found a copy of *The Secret Life of Bees* and I’m slowly reading a book of Shakespeare sonnets in German. Parka and Twin reemerge with a two silver trays of tea and biscuits. They set a table in the Nonfiction section. We sit: Parka and Twin on one side, Anna and I on the other. We make casual conversation about where everyone is from, why Anna and I chose the off-season to come to Greece, and how they came to own a bookstore on Santorini. It turns out that Parka and Twin are Serbian cousins watching the bookstore for a friend who leaves the island during winter.

We are so caught up in the tea, biscuits, and platonic conversation that, when I look out the door, I jump. The white walls lining the street are in shadow. Anna leaps up. “We have to go,” I say, explaining that we are only in Oía for the sunset. We grab our bags and put money on the counter for our two books. At the door, Parka stops us. “You will come back for dinner? It can be ready when the sunset is through.” He is suddenly very tall. I crane my neck to look at him. “We could share some drinks, too,” he adds.

Something in the air has changed. The bookstore feels stuffy and suffocating. The outside air is crisp, cool, and beckoning. I know Anna feels it too because she leans into my backpack, pressing us towards the door. “Anna’s a vegetarian,” I say, thinking this will be too great of a burden for dinner.

“I can make something separate for her,” he says. “Come back for dinner.” His tone has changed. Earlier, ‘tea’ meant *tea*. ‘Dinner’ does not sound like *dinner*. A month

ago we would have jumped at this dinner invitation. We've both made-out with random guys in clubs and I went on four dates with a man before ever knowing his name or age. The aggression we experienced in Athens makes us read hidden meaning in Parka's tone and I play scenes from Lifetime movies in my mind. *The Craigslist Killer* was attractive, I remind myself.

Again, my mind struggles between being polite and being cautious. These men seem harmless and I don't want to be rude, but isn't that the problem many victims face? Women especially? And what about the women who refuse to give out their number or don't respond to a catcall and are killed for their denial? Segments from news channels swim through my mind. I grab the doorframe thinking I may be sick.

Twin puts his hand on Parka's arm. "Let them leave," he says. "They are traveling. They do not want to stay for dinner." I take this sudden intervention, smile, and bolt out of the shop. Anna is right behind me.

Back on the street, we both exhale heavily. "Well," I say, "that was...fun."

"So much for non-creepers."

"And our dogs left." This is the biggest disappointment of all.

It's still not quite time for sunset so we walk up and down the main street along the cliff again. The silence is suddenly disturbed by the sound of running feet. Without saying a word, Anna and I duck into a shallow doorway. The running gets closer. The sleek black body of Jack tears past us, followed closely by Carlos. A few other dogs pass. Jocko is the first to see us and stop. The rest of the pack catches our scent and in an instant we are surrounded by wet tongues and panting. I squat down and open my arms to embrace all seven canines at once. Anna scratches the back of Charlie's neck.

At Castle Point we spread out along the walls and claim the fortress as our own once more. We take pictures of the same view for the twentieth time. The wind has picked up and we finally deem it cool enough to layer with cardigans. Our dogs stand at attention at the top of the stairs. Charlie's wagging tail is the first sign of approaching visitors. We turn towards the strange sound of murmured voices. The talking gets louder and louder until four couples enter Castle Point: German, Spanish, and Asian. Anna and I cannot help but stare. We haven't seen this many people in one spot in what feels like months. Where did they even come from? How did they get to Oía when there was only one bus?

They don't notice us in the corner and start fawning over our dogs. I feel a pang of jealousy as Snow Foot greets the Spanish couple like old friends. An Asian lady bends down next to Charlie and places a peace sign between their faces. The German couple tells Carlos to *sitzen*. After days of wishing we would see other tourists, I suddenly wish we were still alone. The town seemed to belong to us and these people are intruders.

The sunset is over in ten minutes. The sky is painted in pinks, purples, and blues, and the volcano makes a nice shadow over Santorini. As the sun sits above the ocean's horizon it turns the white stucco of the island into a dark orange tan; like the town has been laying out all afternoon. Anna and I do not say it out loud, but it wasn't worth the wait. We let the rest of the tourists leave the Point before we follow a few paces behind. Charlie and Jocko stay with us, but the other dogs are up ahead with the new people.

The return bus will still not arrive for almost forty-five minutes so we take our time. We walk slowly along the winding paths, saying goodbye to a town that we've only known for twelve hours, but feel intimately connected to. Despite our tryst with Parka

and Twin, Santorini is the first place where we have finally been on our own. Anna and I have always traveled with parents or with a large group of friends, but this week has shown us what it's like to travel without the safety in numbers or the confidence of an adult. Athens was overwhelming, but Santorini makes us feel recharged and ready to take on the rest of the continent. It's also made us realize that this trip is actually happening and there's no turning back.

We round the last corner before the bus stop. The convenience store lights are on. I remember that Anna and I have only had tea and biscuits all day. I am about to tell Anna we should grab something before the bus arrives when a bald man steps in front of us. "allo," he says. His accent is thick. He is shorter than me with a stocky build. His ears are pointy and he reminds me of a less attractive Ben Kingsley. Another man appears beside him and greets us. He is the perfect foil to Baldy: tall, handsome, curly hair, light accent—I wonder if he is related to Parka Man.

As if on cue, a cat runs past us. Like a well-oiled machine our last remaining dogs pick up the scent and begin their chase. They are gone in seconds.

"Are you ladies from around here?" Curly asks. Baldy smiles at Anna. They take a step closer, making Anna and I move from the view of the convenience store and into a corner.

"Nope," I reply.

"You are from America?"

"Canada."

"You do not sound Canadian," Curly says, "I spent some time there. Where are you from?"

“Calgary.”

Anna looks at me. She does not do well under pressure. I know she is nervous about the men and wondering what story I am spinning. I try to give her a look that says one of my Aberdeen flatmates was from Calgary, but she doesn't understand.

“You are enjoying Thira?”

“Yes, it's beautiful.”

“What is your name?”

“Elizabeth.”

He turns to Anna, “And you?” Anna looks at me again. I wonder if she'll remember Elizabeth is my middle name.

“Samantha,” she blurts.

For the next ten minutes Curly inquires everything from why we are on Santorini to what are our college majors. I tell him that we are students from the University of Iceland studying volcanology. We've come to Santorini to study the volcano. I begin to let my guard down, but I am still annoyed.

“Where are you staying tonight?” Curly asks.

“Why?”

Baldy, who hasn't spoken since *'allo*, takes a step towards Anna. “When?” he says.

“What?” Anna asks, looking from Baldy to me.

“When?”

“When can we meet you and your friend for a drink?” Curly clarifies.

“We have plans tonight,” I say. “We’re meeting some other backpackers from our hotel.”

Baldy keeps asking Anna, “When?”

“What hotel is that?”

“The Atlantis.” I do not know the name of the villa where Anna and I are staying. The Atlantis is a hotel we saw on the bus ride to Oía. Their sign was neon yellow and green with tridents decorating the sides. Compared to the rest of the buildings on Santorini, it was hard to miss.

“We will just come for one drink.” He takes a step towards me. I slide closer to Anna.

“No, that’s okay. We promised we’d hangout with them because we’re leaving tomorrow.”

“*When?*” Baldy is furious.

“When *what?*” Anna snaps.

“I mean friendship only,” Curly says, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

“Of course.” I see Carlos and Jocko stick their heads around the corner. I call to them, but they don’t budge and neither do the men. There are no streetlights and it’s getting harder to see everyone’s expression. I don’t like that the other tourists can’t see us and I’m worried that the bus will come and go, and we may not even hear it—stranding ourselves in Oía for the night. I’m getting angrier the more trapped we seem. Being the ringleader of the trip, I feel responsible not just for my safety, but for Anna’s, too. I know Anna won’t blame me if something happens to us, but I will. I try to think of a way to pardon us when Curly puts his hand on my arm.

“Maybe we come tomorrow night.”

His touch releases everything I’ve kept knotted up since Anna and I first realized we couldn’t be normal travelers like everyone else. I am angry that just because we are young and female we cannot walk around the Parthenon without being propositioned, and we do not feel safe more than a few yards from our hostel after dark. I am angry that these men make us feel guilty when we say ‘no,’ but I am also angry at myself for feeling guilty in the first place.

Curly squeezes my arm. “Come,” he says softly, “we go, we have a few drinks, we have friendly time. It will be good, no?”

I yank my arm away and grab Anna’s hand. “No!” I shout, resisting the urge to shove him over the cliff. Baldy and Curly turn as if to follow us, but stop when Carlos and Jocko lunge towards them, teeth bared and barking. Anna and I walk straight to the convenience store.

We come out of the store once we are certain the men are gone. Surrounded by the safety of other tourists we find a bench by the bus stop and wait. Gradually our entire pack finds us and sits by our feet. I break off pieces of my purchased granola bar and feed the ones that are looking at me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Anna do the same.

When the bus arrives, Anna and I say goodbye to our dogs and try to keep them from following us onto the bus. We find a spot near the back and we wave to our pack as the bus does a U-turn and heads south to Fira. We wave until we can no longer see the dogs. Facing the front, Anna and I sit in silence. I pull out my camera and start flipping through the photos of the day. I pretend not to notice when Anna snuffles and rubs one of her eyes.

Tomorrow we will fly to Rome. We will continue to be harassed throughout our adventure, but we will be stronger in our refusals and we will be a team instead of having an outburst one at a time. Our experience in Greece will forever shape the way we travel and the way we move about our everyday lives. Years later, Anna and I will agree that no matter where we began our adventure, we were bound to learn the perils that all female travelers face: wanting to travel alone and freely, but knowing there are risks. When I am older and walking the streets of Chicago, when a drunk man whistles and shouts obscenities at me, as I pull my hood around my face and walk faster, I'll think of Curly and Baldy. I'll think of Greece and the lost dogs looking for a friendly face.

## The Hunchback of the Blue Ridge

The cabin smelled of dust, worn fabric, and mouse droppings. Unlit oil lamps stuck out from the walls beneath the low ceiling. Electricity would have spoiled the historical integrity. The cabin felt cozy with two people; five people made it feel cramped. Anyone over six feet tall had to stoop. A large floor loom commanded half the space, spanning the length of two of the four windows. It held the makings of a rug—a *scrap* rug, Amanda called it, referring to the discarded scraps of material woven together to make the rug. Adjacent sat a spinning wheel with a basket of wool stretched from the spindle to the wheel. In the blue morning light, you could almost hear the rustlings of the 19th century mountain family that once called the space home.

Brinegar Cabin is located at milepost 238.5 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Gazing over the Appalachian Mountains in the northwest corner of North Carolina, the hand-built home housed Martin and Caroline Brinegar and their children for nearly fifty years. Purchased and moved closer to the road by the National Park Service in the 1970s, the home still houses the Brinegars' belongings. The prized loom belonged to Mrs. Brinegar, a wedding gift from her mother and over one hundred years old.

I stood in the middle of the cabin. My large, dark sunglasses hid the tears that welled in my eyes. The top of my ranger hat grazed the ceiling. Amanda and Valerie bent near the loom, releasing mousetraps and stuffing them into plastic shopping bags. Each

time they hunched over I wiped a tear that had rolled beneath my glasses. *What am I doing here?* I thought. The pin securing the National Park Service badge to my uniform scratched my breast. I looked at the gold plated buffalo emblazoned against a scene of mountains and trees. What had I done?

It was July 2010. The hot Appalachian air seeped into my polyester uniform and stayed there. I felt like I hadn't showered. Two weeks earlier I had graduated from Kalamazoo College in Michigan. I said goodbye to my home of the past four years and the eight girls—like sisters though we weren't a sorority—I had shared a house with for the past year. Five of them I had lived with for almost three years. During Kalamazoo's summer breaks I had worked as a seasonal ranger at Fort Frederica National Monument. As graduation loomed, I'd applied to positions at other parks. A former military brat, I'd moved and traveled a lot. I wanted to continue my nomadic lifestyle. Working seasonally in National Parks sounded like heaven.

Each mousetrap *snap* made me jump. "There are 150 traps surrounding the loom," Amanda had explained. "The mice will get at it from any angle. They'll even climb on the windowsill and jump. They want to eat the rug fiber that badly." Traps manned any flat surface: the bench, the lower lamm, the upper lamm, the beater, and the countermatch—terms I would know well by the end of the season. A few traps surrounded the basket of wool beside a spinning wheel, but the loom was the real prize. Clear plastic tarp, secured with wood clothespins, covered the loom. Mousetraps sat atop the plastic. I couldn't imagine a mouse making it through all those defenses.

"At Fort Frederica, we couldn't even spray for fire ants," I said.

“Historical integrity is more valuable than mice,” Amanda said. She whacked her stick against another series of traps. “There’s no other way to protect the loom.”

“We’ve tried keeping the mice out of the cabin.” Valerie folded the plastic that covered the spinning wheel. “But nothing works so we have to set the traps.”

“I can’t tell you how many rugs I’ve had to redo because a mouse got to it,” Amanda said, bagging a handful of traps.

“And they eat the heddles, too.” Valerie pointed at the strings stretching up and down the middle of the loom. “Then you have to restring it.”

I pretended to listen as Amanda and Valerie demonstrated how to prepare the cabin for the day: sweep out cobwebs that formed overnight, unlock the back door, store the traps and tarp in the adjacent storage shed. Valerie had a checklist on a clipboard. Behind my glasses, I peeked at my watch. 9:30 a.m. My parents had driven to North Carolina with me and stayed there while I got settled. They’d left at nine a.m. Plenty of time for them to turn around and come get me.

As Valerie led me out to the storage shed, I texted my mother: *Please come get me*, I said. *This was a horrible mistake. I can’t stay here.*

*You’ll be fine*, Mum responded a minute later. *Just give it time.*

We lived in Doughton Park: a mountain on the Parkway that included a hotel, diner, campgrounds, and Brinegar Cabin. Seasonal ranger housing sat at the base of the mountain: a pair of identical two-story white, wooden homes, one for men and one for women. The Chief of Maintenance lived in one house. Amanda, Becky, and I shared the other. Becky occupied the ground floor suite off the kitchen. She was a Fee Collection

Ranger in her sixties. She'd come to the Blue Ridge after a season in the Rocky Mountains. Her children lived in Boone, NC, and she wanted to be closer to them now that her daughter had had a baby. Amanda and I were Interpretive Rangers. Amanda, my supervisor, was fifty-one. She and I lived upstairs in bedrooms across the hall from each other. We shared a bathroom. Amanda loved the Blue Ridge. A Florida native, she'd spent the past eight summers working at milepost 238.5 on the Parkway. Her husband stayed in Jacksonville. They saw each other once every season. She didn't have children.

The road through the park only operated in summer and fall. In winter, ice and snow made it unsafe for vehicle passage. Amanda, Valerie, and I manned Brinegar Cabin, demonstrating 1800s mountain life for passing tourists. Valerie, a Blue Ridge local and former interior decorator, worked part-time at Brinegar. It was her retirement job and something to get her out of the house now and then.

We didn't have Internet in the government housing. Cell phones only worked at the mountain's climax. TVs were absent, too. Amanda owned a small handheld radio. The three of us shared one landline with two physical phones: a wall-mounted phone in the kitchen and a cordless device that lived in Amanda's room. My nights were a millennial's nightmare. Whenever I wasn't at work I lay in bed, following the cracks in the ceiling. I read books, drew, and wrote in my journal until I finally fell asleep. The uneven wooden slats supporting my mattress collapsed often and I'd awake in a deep V between the wall and mattress. When the thought surfaced that this would be my life for the next six months, I did yoga. My cell phone sat on the nightstand beside my badge. Like a drug addict, I checked it constantly even though it blinked "no cell service." The only thing it could do was tell time.

“Pull the bow back and hold it firmly with your thumb.” Valerie demonstrated how to set the mousetrap. “If you let go or slip—that’s how your fingers get caught.” Her free hand moved the straight pin, which, when triggered, would spring the square-shaped bow, ending the loom-eating mouse’s life. “Slide the pin into this notch. Once it’s secure, hold the trap by the base. Again—you don’t want to catch your fingers.” We’d already wrapped the loom in its plastic casing. Gingerly, she set the trap atop the tarp. Amanda stood on the other side of the loom, setting traps with great dexterity and speed. She hardly flinched when a trap misfired.

Valerie handed me a mousetrap. I held it with the same trepidation I would a gun; as if it could fire from a sneeze. Valerie denied my request for gloves. I pictured my fingers broken and bent like a mouse’s spine.

“This is your job,” Amanda reminded me. She pulled back a bow and set the pin without looking.

“What do you do when you find mice in them?” I asked.

“We throw them away.”

“Do you ever find any still alive?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you do?”

“Kill them.”

A coworker at Fort Frederica had scolded me for killing a spider laden with babies. I’d been trying to usher the spider into a cup. The rim caught one of the spider’s

eight legs and a rush of previously unseen babies poured off their mother's back. I'd reflexively stomped the miniature horror movie before anyone could stop me.

Kneeling beside the loom, I squeezed the trap with both thumbs. Two fingers peeled back the bow. I swung the straight pin into the notch of the trigger. Everything in place I set the contraption on the ground and worked up the courage to release it. I let go and squealed as if it was a live grenade. I rolled on my hips, setting off several traps in the process. Snaps ricocheted around the loom. "No! No!" Amanda shouted with each *snap!* One trap latched onto my pocket. When it finally quieted down, only my trap remained set. Valerie shook her head and laughed. A blush crept over Amanda's pale face.

When I first met Amanda I sensed she didn't like me. The day I moved in, she'd been standing at the sink rinsing out a mug. My parents and I walked into the kitchen carrying boxes. I introduced myself and stuck out my hand. Amanda nodded and continued to rinse the mug. She set it on the counter and walked out of the house. Mum wondered aloud why she seemed so disgruntled.

Amanda talked often of her disdain for "young people." She openly criticized millennials for their "lazy, entitled attitudes." Before I'd arrived, two other young, female seasonal park rangers had been stationed at Doughton. They were nineteen and twenty. One girl quit after a few weeks, thus opening up the job that I got. The other girl started the week before I arrived. She lasted five days. Amanda gloated that neither girl could handle the seclusion of living and working on the Blue Ridge. I knew she saw me as just another millennial ranger, who was not cut out for the park service.

Our relationship became more strained when Becky moved out of the house. She'd accepted a new position in Boone. I asked Becky if she knew of other open positions. She didn't.

Without Becky, the atmosphere in the house grew tense. Every morning I found my toiletries—contacts, contact solution, toothbrush, and toothpaste—on the blue tiled floor of Amanda's and my shared bathroom. I asked if I could move into Becky's old room, freeing up the entire second floor for Amanda. She nixed the idea, saying she had turned the suite into a sewing room. I offered to make my room the sewing room, but Amanda said she preferred the bathtub in Becky's suite.

The cordless phone stayed in her room. When I used the kitchen phone, she hovered nearby. Only at night could I make calls. I sat on the floor of the pantry, wedged in between shelves of nonperishable items and the trashcan. I always listened for the discreet click of Amanda picking up the other line. My only moments of privacy were found late at night in the ranger cabin at the peak of the mountain. Up there, I used the office computer and received cell reception in one room of the building. I spent hours there.

My friend Jenny visited during one of my weekends. Her first night there, we sat on my twin bed and watched DreamWorks's *The Prince of Egypt*. Halfway through the movie, the slats beneath the bed collapsed. Jenny and I laughed and struggled to right ourselves. We put the slats back in place and resumed the movie. After Jenny left, Karen, the park superintendent (Amanda's and my boss), approached me in the ranger cabin kitchenette.

"I hear you had a friend stay during your weekend," Karen said.

I sliced an apple on the counter. “Is that not allowed?” I worried I had committed a faux pas.

“You’re allowed to have guests over from time to time. Just remember that you live on government property.”

I stared blankly.

“Even though it’s your private house, it’s still government property.” She spoke slowly. She waited for a wave of understanding to cover my face. It didn’t. “No drugs or alcohol are allowed at your house. You can have wine or beer in moderation. And *no* parties.”

“I didn’t have a party.”

“Just be considerate that you’re sharing a house with someone.”

I told her I’d only had one person over. I explained the bed collapsing and asked if Amanda had complained. Karen suggested I use a campsite the next time a friend visited. I asked if she wanted to drug test me. She hesitated as if considering it. She said no.

Later that afternoon I confronted Amanda in Brinegar Cabin. “I’m sorry if my friend and I disturbed you the other night,” I said. “We were watching a Biblical cartoon and my bed fell.” I described the uneven slats. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard it before. I usually wake up at an angle.”

Amanda watched her hands as they weaved a strip of cloth through the taught strings of the loom. “Keep it down next time.” She pulled the beater bar against the rug.

“I will, but please come to me next time. Karen seemed to think I threw a kegger in my room.”

I waited for Amanda to apologize. Her face was emotionless as she weaved another strip of cloth.

On my days off I explored nearby towns, drove to outlooks along the Blue Ridge, and tried to call the mountains home. An island girl, I thought nothing could be as beautiful as the coast, but the Parkway changed my mind. Green mountains rolled endlessly like the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Mountains closest to the naked eye stood bright green with hints of yellow, brown, and red. Peaks further away shaded to a muted blue until they blended with the sky. At scenic outlooks, I watched white smoke glide over the ridges like an octopus crawling across coral. The Blue Ridge, it seemed, wasn't a bad place to start my NPS career after all.

Each time I returned to the house I found my dresser drawers pulled out, my made bed wrinkled, and my oscillating fan unplugged.

“Did you turn off my fan?” I asked Amanda one afternoon. She wore her uniform as she put dirty dishes in the sink.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You were wasting energy.”

“There's no AC in the house,” I countered. “It's hot and humid. I wanted to keep the air circulating.”

“You shouldn't leave fans running when you're out.” She wiped her hands on the dishtowel. Her thumb wore a thick bandage.

“My drawers were open, too.”

“There are no drugs allowed on federal property.”

“You think I have drugs?”

Amanda looked at me. Her nose arched slightly, like a small ski jump in the middle of her face. The feature was accentuated by her usual upward tilt of the head. She looked down her nose, through the bottom portion of her coke bottle glasses. Her short gray hair maintained the indent from her ranger hat. She reminded me of a Who from Dr. Seuss, but bitchier.

“I wanted to make sure.”

When my mother learned I would be living with my boss she'd warned me to be careful. I brushed her off. I'd worked since I was thirteen and had always gotten along with my bosses. Why would this time be any different? As I pictured Amanda, searching through my bras, shirts, and knickers, sniffing like a drug dog, I finally understood Mum's fears. Amanda had already reported my actions to Karen. If I told her to back off, would she tell Karen I threw a tantrum? Would she claim I was unfit for duty? She'd worked on the Parkway longer than me. She knew more than me, and, honestly, she loved the Blue Ridge more than I did. If Karen had to make a choice over who to keep happy, Amanda would win.

“Just ask me next time,” I said. “Before you turn off my fan. And I don't have any drugs.”

“I know that now.” She held up her bandaged thumb. “I cut myself today.”

“Mousetraps?” I joked. She didn't laugh.

“Cutting an orange this morning. I can't get my thumb wet. Do my dishes for me.” I looked from her to the sink as she walked away. Besides her upturned nose,

Amanda also had a hump. It was unclear whether the hump was a physical deformity or a result of bad posture. She frequently used an inhaler and walked haltingly. As she clumped up the stairs to our rooms, I thought of smashing the plates; throwing them to the floor and running. Amanda would never catch me.

I did her dishes. Part of me wanted to keep the peace with my boss. The other part wanted to prove that not all millennials are lazy, entitled, and spoiled. I also just didn't know how to say no.

I spent as little time in the house as possible. I took up hiking and explored the nearby trails. I drove to neighboring towns and sampled local restaurants and coffee shops. Valerie and her husband invited me over for a cookout. Afterwards we went to a bluegrass festival, purportedly the largest bluegrass festival in the southeast.

"I think you should find another place to live," Mum said on the phone one night. I sat in my usual spot on the floor of the pantry. The smell of coffee grounds and banana peels permeated the air. "Or what about the house next door to you? Can't you move in there?"

"That's the Chief of Maintenance's house," I said.

"Can't you live with him?"

"Men and women can't live in the same housing. I guess the NPS wants to prevent drama."

"And living with your boss won't cause drama?"

After a month, Amanda still hadn't warmed to me. Her peculiarities had escalated to her yelling at herself in her room. The sounds of furniture being moved or knocked

over reverberated through the floor. I didn't know if she shouted at herself or an unseen being. When I described her to friends, I told them to picture Russell Crowe's depiction of John Nash from *A Beautiful Mind*. "But less sympathetic," I said.

Valerie told me of a vacant apartment north of Doughton. "It's a small garage that's been converted into a studio," she said. "I designed it, and my friend rents it out." The rent was half of my monthly earnings. I said I'd think about it.

Meanwhile, I spent most of my shifts outside, demonstrating flax preparation to tourists. If Amanda came outside, I went inside. I pulled out the material in her scrap rug, feigning ignorance and forcing her to redo entire sections. When we climbed the steep slope back to the parking lot she labored under the weight of the cash box and cumbersome knitting items. She'd stop several times to take a hit from her inhaler. I didn't offer to help. Instead I walked faster.

On a morning when Valerie wasn't working, Amanda and I entered Brinegar Cabin, where we silently prepared for the day. I liked releasing the mousetraps more than setting them. I hit the traps with gusto, envisioning Amanda's fingers with each *snap!* A small screech stopped me. Near a corner of the loom, beneath a window, Amanda bent and picked up a trap. By its wooden frame, she held the contraption in the air. Below it hung a mouse, its tail caught beneath the bow. The mouse swung in the air, paddling with its paws, squeaking furiously.

"Oh the poor thing," I said. The few mice I'd seen in Brinegar were dead, crushed to death by the unbaited mousetraps. Amanda rifled a large sandwich bag from her pocket. She dropped the mouse inside and crushed its skull in her fist.

I left the cabin gagging. My arms wrapped around a gnarly beam that supported the roof of the historic porch. The mouse's death seemed to saturate my mouth. I spit out bits of toast that shot from my stomach. My tongue tasted like iron.

Back in the cabin, Amanda finished releasing the mousetraps and preparing the home for tourists. A busload of Spaniards would arrive in an hour. "Do you want to spin or do the flax demonstration?" she asked. The mouse and bag were gone. She couldn't have moved fast enough to deposit them in the bear-proof garbage cans in the parking lot. I knew she couldn't leave the mouse carcass lying around for a visitor to see.

"I'll do flax," I said.

As I set up the breaker scatcher and handfuls of flax, the sound of the crushing skull reverberated in my head. During my lunch break I texted Valerie: *Tell your friend I'll take the room.*

"Is something wrong with your housing?" Karen asked when I called her that Friday to say I was moving.

"It's the cell phone reception," I lied. I didn't want to say it was because of Amanda and confirm that I was just another entitled, weak-willed millennial. "I just really can't be without it. This other place has Wi-Fi *and* cell reception."

"It's a real privilege to live where you're living. And you won't find cheaper rent. What's this new place cost?"

"\$600 a month."

"Does cell phone reception really mean that much? You know you're welcome to use the ranger cabin whenever you want." She sounded like a scolding parent.

I took a breath. “Amanda and I need some time apart.”

“Did something happen between you?”

“Not really. We just don’t make great roommates. It’s hard to live with your boss, you know? It’s almost impossible to leave the work at the office.”

“Can you give me an example?”

I looked around the cabin for eavesdropping ears. I told her about washing Amanda’s dishes, being ordered to get things from her room, and discovering that she snooped through my things. We needed space. Living and working together was too much.

“What about your weekends?” Karen asked. “You can leave town then. That would be a nice break.”

“She’s never going to like living with me. You know how she feels about ‘young people.’ This way, we both win—she gets the place to herself and I get Wi-Fi.”

Karen conceded. It would take a few days to go through the paperwork. I asked her not to tell to Amanda. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. I also didn’t want to incur whatever wrath she normally released alone in her room, yelling at herself and throwing things.

At the start of my next weekend I headed to Asheville to visit relatives. I planned to spend the following week packing my room. During my next weekend I would move into my new home.

“Karen told me you’re moving.”

Amanda sat at the dining room table. Her dulcimer lay in front of her. She played it often. When not in use, the instrument lived on the table. I had asked to move it once so I could eat a bowl of cereal. She'd refused.

I stood with my weekend bag still slung over my shoulder. I had just returned from Asheville.

"I just thought it would be easier. I'll have cell reception and you can have this whole place to yourself."

Amanda met my eyes. "You told Karen I made you do my dishes?"

"Well...you did."

"So asking you to do a few dishes here and there is *such* an inconvenience." Her cheeks flushed. Her shoulders heaved with each breath. I held the strap of my bag with both hands. I resisted matching her anger.

"You don't wash mine. It's not exactly a two-way street."

"I am fifty-one years old. I think I deserve to ask someone to do my dishes every now and then."

I felt my own face flush. I told her that we were equals in the house, but she still treated me like a subordinate. "I'm sorry I complained behind your back," I said. "Karen wanted to know why I was moving so I told her. She wasn't supposed to tell you."

"And you told her I make you fetch me things from my room?"

I shrugged.

"Climbing stairs is difficult for me," she hissed. "I'm *so sorry* that I asked you to do such a *small favor*."

“You don’t ask.” I shifted the bag on my shoulder. “You tell me to do things. You’re my supervisor and you know I won’t say no.”

I crossed the living room and climbed the stairs to our bedrooms. I’d left a small rock by the inside of my door to see if Amanda still snuck into my room. The rock sat across the room, having skated several feet into my closet. I threw my bag on my bed, but kept my backpack on. I marched downstairs. Amanda still sat at the dulcimer. Her eyes remained fixed on the instrument.

“I’m going to go to the ranger cabin,” I said. “I think we both need some time to cool down.” I walked through the kitchen. My hand on the doorknob I turned back towards her. “And stop going into my fucking room.”

When I got to the ranger cabin I called my parents. Mum told me to quit. The work environment was too toxic. I called friends and rangers at Fort Frederica. They also told me to quit. But quitting felt like letting Amanda win. Just like the girls before me, she’d wanted me gone since the day I arrived. She was cordial to people close to her age, but not to anyone born during the Reagan or Bush presidencies. I stared out the window. The sun cascaded pink and purple over the mountains. I had started liking the Blue Ridge. I liked the tourists, I liked the flax demonstrations, and, it killed me to admit it, but I even liked fiddling with the loom. The mountain air felt refreshing, the Appalachian scenery exotic with its high altitude and smoke-like fog. I wanted to stay. I especially wanted to stay with the park service. My contract ended in November. Could I wait that long? As such a young and largely inexperienced ranger, I knew leaving the Parkway would end my career with the NPS. If I packed up my green and gray uniform, what else did I have?

Just before midnight, I submitted my letter of resignation. *Effective immediately*, I wrote. I emailed it to Karen. The letter cited irreconcilable differences with Amanda and a hostile work environment.

When I arrived back from the ranger cabin the house sat in pitch-black darkness. The quiet made me feel as though something watched me from the forest. Inside the house only one lamp illuminated the living room. It had been taken off an end table and set in the middle of the coffee table. Beneath its glow stood one of Amanda's red wine glasses, still stained maroon. The rim of the glass had been broken off. The bottom half—the cupped part—remained intact. The rim hung on the cupped part like someone hanging a horseshoe on a nail. I stared at it.

At seven a.m. the next morning I began packing my room. I kept my door closed until Amanda left for work. The phone rang around 7:30. Amanda answered from the kitchen. She shouted for me to come downstairs.

A small part of me expected Karen to ask me to stay. "We'll make it work," I wanted to hear. "We'll move you to a different outpost." She didn't. She told me to go to the administration office before I left and fill out paperwork. "I'm sorry things didn't work out," she said. Amanda stayed in the kitchen. I stretched the cord as far as it could go into Becky's old suite.

"I wish you hadn't told her what I said," I whispered. *I blame you*, I wanted to say. *I spoke to you in confidence and now you've ruined everything*.

“We need Amanda,” Karen said. “We’re closing this section of the Parkway next year for road repairs. We’ll still need a ranger on duty to open up Brinegar once a week. Amanda is the only ranger who will be here for a whole summer by herself.”

“What about Valerie? She lives here.”

“Amanda wants it.”

Tears pricked my eyes. Karen’s choice was Amanda or me. She’d chosen the one that was better for the park. I understood that. Still, it hurt.

For the next few hours I packed my room and loaded my car. I dumped the perishable items I had in the fridge. I didn’t want to leave anything for Amanda. She arrived back at the house around noon. I shut my door. She climbed the stairs and pounded.

“I need to collect your badge,” she bellowed. “It’s federal property. You can’t take it.”

I opened my door and glared at her. “I’ll turn them in at administration,” I snapped. I didn’t want her to think she could boss me around anymore.

“You’ll give them to me.” She held out her palm. At the bottom of the stairs stood Ron, the Chief of Maintenance. His sad eyes met mine briefly before turning to the banister. “Ron’s here to make sure you don’t do anything,” Amanda said. She looked down her nose at me.

“Do you think I’m going to hurt you?”

“I can’t take any chances.”

I looked at Ron. His hand ran up and down the banister as if fascinated with the wood grain. I stomped across my room. The badge sat on my nightstand. I felt the golden

buffalo snort angrily with me. The pin hung loose. I didn't bother securing it to the safety clasp. If Amanda brought someone to protect her from me then I'd give her a reason. I imagined the pin piercing her flesh and sticking through the back of her hand. I slammed the badge it into her palm. She didn't flinch. Her mouse murdering hands were too hardened by setting traps.

Amanda breathed heavily. Palpable hate radiated with each breath. I wanted to ask her why the hell she hated me so much.

Karen's words suddenly came back to me: "Amanda wants it." What she'd really meant was, "Amanda needs it."

Amanda was lonely. Ron had followed her to the house because it was his job. He didn't like Amanda. No one did. Becky and Karen never socialized with her. Amanda and Valerie had worked together for eight seasons and yet Valerie had never had Amanda over for dinner. Valerie had invited me over in less than a month. I'd had a visitor during my first week on the Parkway. Amanda's husband came up only once during her eight-month contract. She never left the house except to go to work and grocery shop. I'd assumed that was her choice, that she was a homebody. In reality, she had no other option.

Amanda turned and lumbered down the steps. Ron looked at me. "Good luck to you," he said before following Amanda. Her labored breathing echoed through the empty house. I heard the *clack* of the screen door hitting the wooden frame.

An hour later I drove south towards US-21. I watched Doughton Park disappear in my rearview mirror. My small hatchback sailed down the winding mountains roads. I wanted

as much distance between Amanda and me as possible. A large stuffed penguin sat in the passenger seat, wearing my ranger hat. I imagined us both giving the finger as we waved goodbye. In the town outside the park, I stopped at the single blinking red light. To the north loomed the Parkway. To the south, home and the knowledge that I was about to be like every other millennial: unemployed and living with my parents. Beneath the ranger hat the penguin wore a goofy grin. *Smokey the Penguin*, I thought, turning south. Where was I going? I wasn't sure. But it would be better than what I had left behind.

## Where Are You From?

*“Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend.”*

— Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*

“Where is this car from, ma’am?”

“Georgia.”

“The license plate doesn’t say Georgia.”

I stared at my reflection in the U.S. Customs Officer’s aviator sunglasses. “But there’s a giant peach on it,” I said.

“Pull your car up slowly, ma’am.”

I shifted my Honda Fit into Drive and took my foot off the brake. The car rolled forward until the guard could see my license plate in his convex mirror. He raised his hand like a crossing guard. I stopped. He looked back and forth from my license plate to my passport. I leaned forward in my seat and peered into his convex mirror. I knew I had been correct that there was a peach in the middle of my Georgia license plate, but I had to make sure. Ross stared straight ahead from the passenger seat. He didn’t say anything. We’d known each other for seven years and dated for three of them. His emotionless face told me he was nervous.

Ross and I were spending the summer living and working at a boutique hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan. Ross had recently graduated from engineering school. I had graduated from my liberal arts college the previous year. After spending nine months living at home and working part-time at a Holiday Inn Express and Talbots clothing store, I thought living and working on an island in Lake Huron would be a fun way to spend the summer and make money while we both searched for full-time jobs. Ross applied for and got his first passport that summer. An avid traveler and former military brat, I had been bugging Ross to get the passport. I wanted us to start traveling. Once his navy blue, gold-embossed booklet arrived I proposed a day-trip to Canada so he could get his first stamp.

Our travels in Canada were uneventful. It was late in the season and we each only had one day off from work. We caught an early morning ferry to Mackinaw City and immediately headed north through Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Sault Ste. Marie, a city that had been separated into two communities after the War of 1812. We parked at the famous Soo Locks and watched a freighter on the Lake Huron side wait as the twenty-one foot drop was filled in and evened out to meet Lake Superior. We traveled over the nearly three mile long International Bridge, which separates the U.S. and Canada. At the border we learned that passport stamps were not given out when you drove between countries. Not wanting to waste our one afternoon in Canada, we headed up to Pancake Bay, where we tromped around on cold, wet sand and touched Lake Superior for the first time. We had an early dinner at a place with questionable unlimited sushi before heading back over International Bridge, where traffic crawled like a sloth. We were worried about making the last boat back to Mackinac Island when we finally reached the U.S. border.

The agent with the reflective aviator glasses handed Ross's passport back almost immediately. Mine remained open in his hand as he looked from my passport, to his computer, and then to my car.

"What are you doing in Canada?" the agent asked.

"We wanted to go for a day-trip," I said. I pointed to Ross. "He just got his first passport so we wanted to take it for a spin."

"What are you doing in Michigan?"

"Working on Mackinac Island."

"But you're from Georgia."

"Yes. It's just a summer job."

"Why would you come from Georgia to Michigan for a summer job?"

I looked at Ross. Like with my license plate, the agent's inquiries made me question myself. *Is my car from Georgia? Why am I in Michigan for the summer?*

The officer motioned across the road and another blue-uniformed official came to the booth. Aviator Glasses handed him my passport. "I need you to pull into that building," he instructed me, pointing to a two-story plain white structure with a carport underneath.

"Is there something wrong with my passport?" I asked.

"Please pull into that building, ma'am."

Ross stayed silent as the new officer waved us into the two-car garage. He told me to turn off the vehicle and remain in the car. He took a cursory glance around the hatchback. The garage was stark white with little shelving and various pieces of equipment. I assumed everything was to detect drugs or explosives. A second car was in

the garage. Another Customs agent came down a set of stairs that led to the top floor of the building.

To catch the last ferry to the island, Ross and I had to get back to Mackinaw City by 10:20 p.m. This nonsense was likely to make us miss our boat and possibly not make it to work in the morning. I imagined my phone conversation with my boss: *Sorry, Ross and I can't make it in tomorrow. My crazy citizenship got us detained outside of Canada.*

The Customs officer who'd waved us into the garage approached my driver's side window. He held my passport in his right hand. "Please turn off the car and step out of the vehicle. Leave your keys in the ignition."

"Do people not go to Canada just for the day?" I asked. "It's so close."

"Just step out of the vehicle, please."

I rolled my eyes at Ross.

We stepped out of the car and waited for the next command. The second agent stretched a pair of latex gloves over his hands. "Do you have any weapons on you, or in the vehicle, that I should know about?" he asked. Ross said he had a small knife in his front pocket. The agents told him not to touch his pocket. They told us to go up the stairs and wait in a holding room while they inspected my car. I looked at Ross and laughed. "Every time," I said, referencing a conversation we'd had while waiting on International Bridge. I had joked to Ross that re-entering the United States was always a hassle for me and I hoped we wouldn't be detained.

The Customs agent who was holding my passport stopped me. "Do you get pulled over a lot, ma'am?" he asked.

“Every time I go in and out of the country,” I said. Ross stood at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the top floor. With the expression on his face and stiffness of his body, he could have been one of those cavemen models from museum exhibits.

“Do you travel a lot, ma’am?”

“You’re holding my passport,” I said, trying to suppress the anger that was rising from my chest, making its way to explode out of my mouth. “You tell me.”

The Customs agent had a finger in my navy blue booklet, bookmarking a certain page. “Where are you from, ma’am?”

Like so many military brats, I never knew how to answer this question. *Do you mean where I was born, or where I spent the most time?* I sometimes asked. *Do you want to know the last place I lived, or the region that I identify with culturally?* I based my answer upon how long I expected to know the person asking. A future friend or a classmate would get, “I’m from all over, but most recently \_\_\_\_\_.” A casual acquaintance would only learn wherever I was currently residing. Someone random, like a taxi driver or curious stranger, would get the first place that popped into my head.

My parents spent ten years working overseas for the U.S. Department of Defense. My father was an art teacher for the military schools and my mother was a base librarian. As civilians, Mum and Dad were not permitted to live on-base. This meant owning a house and paying property taxes to whichever foreign country they were living in. They lived outside of Naval Air Station Keflavik in Iceland for several years before transferring to Royal Air Force (RAF) Lakenheath, two hours north of London. They stayed at Lakenheath for seven years, living in the small village of Bury St. Edmunds. After five years, my parents were legally “settled” in the United Kingdom.

*(1) A person born in the United Kingdom after commencement [F1, or in a qualifying territory on or after the appointed day,] shall be a British citizen if at the time of the birth*

*his father or mother is—*

*(a) a British citizen; or*

*(b) settled in the United Kingdom [F2 or that territory].*

*— Excerpt from the British Nationality Act 1981*

I came along in 1988 at the end of my parents' fifth year in the UK. Because of their "settled" status, they assumed I would be granted dual citizenship like other RAF civilian children. However, British law had recently changed; children born to non-British nationals were no longer granted the luxury of one day carrying two different colored passports. At the West Suffolk Hospital my parents were told to make a choice between the two nationalities. They chose the one they thought would be the easiest: American.

We stayed in England for the next two years. Baby videos show a pale, towheaded child with a slight accent that was influenced by my English babysitter. I was issued a National Health Number and benefitted from the perks of socialized health care when I had a heart murmur. My parents got my Social Security Number at a later date.

Dad and I moved to Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba, in the summer of 1990. We lived there for four years, while my mother cared for an ailing parent on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Dad and I spent the academic year on Gitmo and flew to Georgia for every school holiday. This ended abruptly in August of 1994 when, fleeing their homelands, Cuban and Haitian refugees were brought to Gitmo en masse. Worried about

a bloody coup, the U.S. government evacuated all civilians from Gitmo within a week. Dad and I were at our new posting by Labor Day: Giessen Army Depot in Germany. Dad retired a year later, and we moved to St. Simons Island to be with Mum.

*Home (hōm) n. 1. A place where one lives. 4b. A valued place regarded as a refuge or place of origin. 5. The place, such as a town, where one was born or has lived for a long period. 7. The place where something is discovered, founded, developed, or promoted. – adj. 2. Of, relating to, or being a place of origin or headquarters. – adv. 2. On or into the point at which something is directed. 3. To the center or heart of something. – idioms. **At home.** 2. Comfortable and relaxed; at ease. 3. Feeling an easy competence and familiarity.*

*— The American Heritage College Dictionary*

My first two years on St. Simons I told my new classmates not to get used to me. I was sure we would be moving soon. I scoured DoDDS booklets and ranked the bases from most to least desirable. Cuba remained the best option. My friends, whose parents were active military, were still there. Since we couldn't bring our pets, Japan ranked near the bottom. I considered myself a British citizen, so England was high on my list.

It was easy to see that I was different from my new classmates. Most had only traveled as far as Atlanta (five hours north) or Jacksonville, Florida (an hour and a half south). Their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived just a short drive away, and their family roots were as deep in the southern soil as the ancient live oak trees that pimpled the Georgia coast.

Many students thought I had moved to St. Simons from “somewhere up north” (I was called a Yankee). I felt like a foreign exchange student, who comes to a new country and regales people with their otherness. I felt superior when I could name more European countries than my fellow fifth graders. I called flashlights “torches” and spelled words the British “—our” and “—re.” I wrote *Mum* in front of people as often as possible. “I can be anything I want to be,” I proudly announced, “except President.” *Danke* and *bitte* were my responses when someone handed me scissors. If there was a pop culture reference I didn’t understand, I used Cuba as my excuse: *I grew up in a Communist country. Castro didn’t let us watch Nickelodeon.*

When Dad accepted a local teaching job, I realized we were in the States for the long haul. By then it was too late to assimilate and my position as “not from here, never will be from here” was solidified. I had spent so long proving to everyone that I wasn’t like them—that there wasn’t a bone in my body that was southern—that, as we entered the torrid hormonal landscape of middle school, I couldn’t work my way back in.

In 2002, when the state of Georgia got its first Republican governor in over 130 years, I learned about the South’s negative stereotypes. Southerners were painted as racist, homophobic, narrow-minded, and hateful towards anything that strayed from their conservative ideals. If those characteristics defined the South, I decided, then I wanted no part. As my community became more Republican, I became more foreign. I emphasized my British-ness by perfecting a scone and clotted cream recipe. My car displayed a Union Jack on its fender, and German and Cuban flags on its bumper. I told people I had dual British and American citizenship, but hadn’t bothered to get my British passport yet

(all the while obsessively trying to figure out how to actually *get* dual British-American citizenship).

There were times I envied the rooted lives of my classmates. The town was like a large extended family because everyone had grown up together; friends knew other friends' cousins, parents had gone to the same college as other parents, etc. Anytime I felt remotely alone, however, it only took a quick trip inside a World Atlas or a bookstore's Travel Section to lift my spirits. I chalked my feelings of loneliness and restlessness up to what I always had: *This isn't my home. I'll finally feel what they're feeling when I'm home.*

*To satisfy the residence requirement you should not have been absent for more than 90 days in the last 12 months. And the total number of days absence for the whole 5 year period should not exceed 450. If you are married to, or in a civil partnership with a British citizen, the total number of days absence for the whole 3 year period should not exceed 270.*

— *Excerpt from British Citizenship Requirements*

My chance to return home, my British home, came in 2007. It was the summer before my junior year abroad in the United Kingdom. I was a sophomore at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. After high school, I zoomed above the Mason-Dixon line as fast as my parents' Chevy suburban would go. I thought of the North, the Yankees, as the region of the US where I belonged. After all, I reasoned, my parents were originally from New Jersey and Indiana. My roots were sure to take hold in the cold and icy Michigan earth.

In Michigan, however, I was labeled a Southerner. England, Cuba, and Germany were all wiped from my history the moment I added the Bible Belt to the list of places where I was from. Study abroad then became my chance to be among “my people” once again.

I planned to spend the semester becoming intimately acquainted with my birth country. As part of my U.K. student visa application I scheduled an in-person interview at the Homeland Security Office in Jacksonville two months before my departure. I don’t remember the initial interview except that the Customs agent acted like I was withholding information.

“This is your only passport?” she asked.

“Yes?” I didn’t know what other passport I should have.

“Do you have proof of citizenship?”

I pointed at the documents in her hands. “I have my birth certificate, if that’s what you mean.”

“No.” She flipped through the papers again. “Do you have your National Health Number?”

I told her I was an American citizen. There would be no claiming dual British-American citizenship with such an important trip in the balance. She looked from her computer screen to my passport. I asked if I could be the citizen of two countries and not know it.

My hopes skyrocketed as we sat together in the cold, bland room. I envisioned the reaction I would have when she said the words I had dreamed about since settling in the States: “Congratulations, Georgia Knapp, you are a British citizen! You are the worldly

person you always thought you were. You are now free to move and travel about 174 different countries.” Instead, she handed back my documents and ushered me out the door. She said my case would require a second interview. An office clerk made a new appointment for me that was uncomfortably close to my UK departure date.

When I told this story to my parents’ RAF Lakenheath friends, they asked why I hadn’t brought my National Health Number.

“We’re not sure where it is,” my dad said. “We haven’t needed it since we left England.”

“That’s the problem,” the English wife said. “You have a National Health Number, but no passport to back it up. You have dual citizenship.” My parents explained the law changed right before I was born, but their friend said she had seen other kids from their Lakenheath days have the same problem. “You were grandfathered in,” she said. “You have the citizenship.”

“What do I do when I’m in the UK?” I asked.

“Don’t commit a crime,” she joked. “You’ll be tried as a British citizen and the American government can’t help you.”

*In a general, a Child Born Outside the U.S. is a Citizen at Birth when the Child’s Parents Are Married to each other at the Time of Birth IF...*

*If the U.S. citizen parent spent time abroad in any of the following three capacities, this can also be counted towards the physical presence requirement:*

- *Serving honorably in the U.S. armed forces;*
- *Employed with the U.S. government; or*

- *Employed with certain international organizations.*

— *Excerpt from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*

“Where are you from?”

The U.S. Customs agent stared at me, waiting for an answer. I considered my multitude of responses. *I’m from Georgia, but I don’t have an accent, and I don’t act very southern. I’m from Cuba, but I don’t speak Spanish. I’m from the Midwest, but I’ve only lived here while going to college.*

“All over,” I answered. “I’m a military brat.”

The agent told Ross and me to wait upstairs while they searched my car. In the waiting area, Ross and I told an officer behind a desk why we were there. She motioned to a bench underneath a long set of windows. We sat and waited. We hadn’t been allowed to take our cell phones out of the car with us. I wondered when I would be able to text my supervisor and let her know we probably wouldn’t make it back to Mackinac Island that night.

“*Does this happen to you a lot?*” Ross asked. “You’ve joked about it, but now I’m thinking you were being serious.”

I nodded.

After what felt like an hour, the Customs agent who had initially escorted us into the garage emerged. He handed my passport to me. We were free to go; the keys were in the car. I wanted to ask what made them pull me over. Instead I walked out of the room while Ross thanked the agents.

We barely made the last ferry back to Mackinac Island. We sat near a window watching the lights of the island get bigger and bigger. The Grand Hotel blazed. Colored lights ornamented the decks of the Pink Pony. Reflected in the waters of Lake Huron, our hotel, the Iroquois, waved to us. I put my head on Ross's shoulder. My last week in Michigan. The following morning I would quit my job at the Iroquois. I'd accepted an internship at Northlight Theatre in Chicago, my next home. At least for the time being.

## It Hurts to Look

I stared at the red ring surrounding each blue iris. I thought of a solar eclipse. My iris was the moon. Hidden under the aqua spheres: a red sun.

For the past two weeks my eyes had been in pain. My eyeballs felt like grapes noshed between teeth. Sunlight made me shield myself like a cartoon vampire. I wore sunglasses at dusk and clamped my eyes shut against the blaring fluorescent lights on the Chicago El.

I had moved to Evanston four months earlier. I lived three miles from the city limits of Chicago, the city I hoped to call home. It had been two years since I'd graduated from a small liberal arts college in Michigan. After graduation I floated around the South and Midwest, working seasonal jobs, trying to find some stability. A former military brat, I was used to the transient lifestyle. I had lived in England, Cuba, and Germany, and—in the U.S.—in Georgia, Michigan, and North Carolina. With each move, packing up and starting anew got harder. At twenty-three years old, I wanted to both settle down and to never stop moving. My college friends had found places to establish roots and build communities. I wasn't sure if I ever would, or if I wanted to.

My eye pain started with two weeks of dry irritation. I blamed it on fatigue. Mornings and nights I worked as an administrative intern at Chicago's Lifeline Theatre. In the afternoons I folded clothes at the Gap. On weekends I house—and pet—sat in

Evanston and Chicago. When sunlight irritated my eyes, I dismissed it as genetics. *Blue-eyes are sensitive to light*, I reminded myself, donning sunglasses inside the theatre box office. Coworkers inquired about my red eyes. I brushed off their concerns, explaining simply: “The air is too dry.”

Still settling into my new home, I resisted lamenting about my eye pain to coworkers and friends. I didn’t want to be pegged as weak or whiney. Growing up surrounded by military personnel, I had adopted the *soldier on* attitude: if you were sad, scared, or lonely you simply sucked it up and dealt with it on your own. I viewed self-sufficiency as the ultimate sign of strength. Unfortunately, this view often left me feeling isolated. When I was lonely after a new move, I kept the feelings to myself, choosing to be miserable at home rather than invite someone over. If I felt unwell, I didn’t complain or do anything about it until I was too sick to stand. I wanted to reach out to people, but I worried that doing so would make me seem clingy or dependent—qualities that wouldn’t earn me many friends. I fended for myself rather than burdening others with my worries or concerns. As my eye pain increased daily, I stayed mute, hoping the ailment would heal itself.

The first sign that my eyes suffered from more than fatigue occurred at Lifeline. I sat in the Managing Director’s office discussing that evening’s Bingo n’ Booze fundraiser. Allison sat with her back to a window. Silver light from the overcast February sky surrounded her like a glowing aura. I tried to look at her. Each time my eyes found her face they dove to a dark corner.

Following my gaze, Allison looked at the corner. I could hear her thinking:

*What's there?*

I asked if she minded my facing the wall. "It hurts to look at you," I said. "I mean it hurts to look at the window behind you. Bright lights hurt my eyes recently."

She turned to the cloud covered sky then back at me.

"I think I'm just tired," I said, angling my seat towards the wall.

At Bingo n' Booze, the bar's dim lighting felt like screwdrivers tightening my pupils. I stared at the floor whenever possible. I didn't know if tears welled in my eyes from pain or a natural defense mechanism against the assaulting light. At the end of the night, riding the train alone to Evanston, I wore sunglasses. The next morning I awoke to the red rings in my eyes.

The longer I stared, the more the red seemed to seep into the whites of my corneas. My eyelids were swollen and purple. I pulled out my laptop and searched for "eye care specialists in Evanston." The blue light of the computer's screen felt like a dryer ball shoved into my corneas. I found an optometrist three blocks away. While the number rang, I shut my blinds, blocking as much light as possible. A woman answered. I said I needed an appointment.

"We have an opening at 3:30 today and two p.m. tomorrow," she said.

I chose two p.m. My eye problems didn't warrant missing work.

The receptionist went through the spiel of bringing a photo ID and health insurance card. I said I was having problems with my contacts. She asked for the symptoms.

“For the past few weeks I’ve grown more sensitive to light,” I said. I felt like a hypochondriac. “It’s gotten to the point where I can’t have any lights on.”

“Oh.” Her chipper tone dropped. “Are you sure you want to come in tomorrow?”

“Yes. I have to be at my internship by ten today.”

“Ma’am, do your eyes hurt?”

“My actual eyeballs?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yeah. They’re excruciating, really.”

“How long have they been hurting?”

“About two weeks.”

She told me to come in at 10:30 a.m. They didn’t open until eleven a.m.

I tried to keep my voice from shaking. Was this really that serious? “I wasn’t planning on calling in sick to work,” I said.

“I think you should come to the office,” she said flatly.

At the optometrist’s office my fingers dug into my purse. I felt my wallet, my phone, a hairbrush, and other random items. Fingering the objects gave my fidgety hands something to do. Sweat welled in my palms. Dr. Green sat on a stool in front of me. Our knees touched.

I hated going to the eye doctor. I didn’t like the intimacy of the dark exam room or the “A or B” tests that made me question my own judgment. The exams made me think of the forced-open eye scene from *A Clockwork Orange*. What I hated most was the need for the optometrist. Unlike my teeth or my weight, I had no control over the

deterioration of my eyes. No amount of flossing or exercise would give me 20/20 vision, and I had to rely on an optometrist in order to see. I was in the fifth grade when I got my first pair of glasses. I wore them for five years. When, during my sophomore year of high school, I got contacts, I vowed to never wear glasses again. Contacts not only disguised my need for prescriptive eyewear, but, by affixing straight onto the eyeball, contacts provided sharper focus and therefore—in my mind—less need for eye exams. Still, with each optometrist visit my anxiety increased. I worried about the day when my prescription became so bad that contacts no longer worked.

Dr. Green swung the phoropter in front of my face. He tapped the crescent perch behind the “A or B” lenses. “Rest your chin here and look straight ahead,” he said.

He shot a beam of light into my eyes. I could almost hear my pupils sizzle from the sharp, burning light.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed.

We simultaneously jerked back from the equipment—him in surprise, me in pain. Dr. Green’s eyes were wide.

“Shit,” he said again. He shook his head, cleared his throat, and looked hesitantly at the equipment. “Let’s take one more look.”

I leaned onto the chinrest again. Dr. Green counted to three and turned on the light. Tears sprang from my eyes. Dr. Green pushed the phoropter away and offered a box of tissues.

“Can you get by without your contacts?”

“Not out and about,” I said, sopping up the tears. “My glasses are about five years old.”

“You’re going to need to stop wearing your contacts.”

Dr. Green rolled to the exam room door and pointed at a poster with four picture squares. Each image contained a close-up of a green-brown iris and black pupil. The first picture showed a few small white dots in the pupil. The fourth picture showed dense clusters of white dots scattered throughout the pupil and iris, like a field of cotton. “This is your eye,” Dr. Green said, gazing at the image. “Like a galaxy of stars in there.” He turned to me. “Yours is one of the worst cases I’ve ever seen.”

I chewed my bottom lip.

“So I’ll be without my contacts for a week?”

Dr. Green stood. “It could be longer. I’m sending you down the street to Dr. Wu. He’s an eye surgeon.” He opened the door and motioned for me to follow.

My voice climbed an octave. “Do you think I need eye surgery?”

“I think you need to cancel your plans for today.”

He asked the receptionist to dial the ophthalmologist’s office. I listened as he spoke with Dr. Wu. He asked about squeezing me in and used words ending in *itis*. “Maybe keratitis or uveitis,” he said. “It looks bad.”

The word “surgery” flashed in my head like a neon motel sign. What did eye surgery entail? Would I be put under anesthesia? Or would I watch instruments stab and peel back my cornea? Would I be blinded while I healed? I thought of everyone I knew in Chicago. I moved around so much that it took me a while to make close friends. My father had family in Chicago, but, growing up abroad, I rarely saw them. My half-sister had moved to Chicago around the same time I did, but I knew her about as well as I did

my new roommates. My parents and my boyfriend were several states away. If I needed surgery, who could I ask to go with me?

Dr. Green and Dr. Wu set my appointment for two p.m.

“Did you walk or drive here?” Dr. Green asked.

I told him I walked.

“You should take your contacts out right now,” he said.

“Is it really that bad?”

He brought me back to the poster with the four gradually worsening eyes. He pointed at the worst one. “These white dots are small tears in your cornea.” I stared at the constellations. “How often do you change your contacts?”

“Once a month.” My mouth was dry. I hadn’t eaten, but I felt like I might throw up.

Dr. Green sighed. “Those are the worst kind.” He pointed at each white dot. “Your contacts probably had small tears you couldn’t see. Each time you wore the contacts they scratched your eye. Then the scratches became infected under the contacts.”

“Is that when my eyes got dry and scratchy?”

He nodded. “You gave yourself the infection over and over.”

I imagined myself lying in bed, eyes swathed in gauze and patches.

I thanked Dr. Green and left. Outside, I tore out my contacts and threw them in a trashcan. Tears welled. It was as if two fingers had been poking my eyeballs and suddenly released.

Back in my apartment, I burrowed under my comforter. The absence of light felt good. I checked the time on my phone. Eleven a.m. Three hours until I possibly learned I would lose my sight forever.

Despite what Dr. Green had said, I didn't blame the infection on the tears in my contacts. I blamed myself. My need to be staunchly independent prohibited me from reaching out to people. A counselor had once called me "fiercely independent" and I'd worn her words like a badge of honor. As I hid beneath my quilt, I realized she hadn't meant the description as a compliment. Needing people wasn't a weakness; it was necessary. Had I told someone about my eye pain, maybe they would have advised I take out my contacts. Had I complained, maybe a coworker would have suggested I see an eye doctor sooner than I did. Had I gone to the optometrist at the first stab of pain, maybe I wouldn't be worried about going blind.

I scrolled through the contact list on my phone before putting it back on my nightstand. I still couldn't think of a single person to call.

Dr. Wu saw me promptly at two p.m. His reaction mirrored Dr. Green's.

"Can you stand *any* light?" he asked.

"Barely." I recounted Bingo n' Booze.

He prescribed steroid drops and forbade me from wearing contact lenses indefinitely.

"Once your eyes start to heal, you'll need a new prescription," he said.

"Contacts?" I asked, hopefully.

"Glasses."

I filled the prescription and bought new glasses. For the next two months, I saw Dr. Wu bi-weekly to check on the progress of my eyes. I wouldn't need surgery, but the damage had been done. Had I sought help immediately, my eyes would have healed within a few weeks. Waiting a month had scarred my eyes forever. They could no longer produce the natural moisture that prevents contacts from scratching the cornea.

"It will be like dragging a rake across your eyes every day," Dr. Wu said.

Four months after my eye pain began, I prepared for another move, this time back to a temporary seasonal position in Michigan. I thanked both doctors for their help, said goodbye to Lifeline, and drove my packed car eastward out of Chicago.

Two years later, I walked around my Chicago apartment, preparing for a day on the beach. My friend Katie stood in the dining room.

When my seasonal job in Michigan ended, I returned to Chicago, again not knowing if I would finally settle down or pick up and move within the year. In my first week back in the city I was flooded with *welcome home* and *glad you're back* messages. The community of friends I had started to build was not only still there, but awaiting my return. Lifeline hired me as an employee, and I moved into an apartment with a good friend. I took strides to get to know my half-sister. I told her about my eye scare and she expressed concern that I hadn't reached out. "I would have gone to the doctor with you," she said. For the first time in years, when my one-year anniversary of moving to a new place approached, I had no desire to pack up and leave.

Katie and I both had the day off from Lifeline for the Fourth of July. I poked my head into the living room. "Do you want something red, white, and blue?" I asked.

“I’m wearing a red bathing suit,” Katie said. “So I’m covered.”

I threw on a red, white, and blue lei. “Do you think we’re going to swim?” I asked.

“The lake should be warm enough.”

“Should I wear my glasses or contacts?”

“Contacts! I’ve never seen you without your glasses.”

I went to the bathroom and pulled out the last box of contact lenses I had ordered with Dr. Green. The expiration date read June 2017. The contacts still hurt my eyes. I wore them sparingly.

Sliding the lenses out of their saline solution and placing them on my eyes felt like reawakening old muscles. I blinked, helping the contacts slide into place. I could feel them form around my eyeballs. As one adapts to a new home, I’d adapted to glasses. They no longer felt intrusive on my face. In fact, I’d grown to love my glasses. I liked the variety of frames I could choose and how the colorful rims enhanced my personality. My current glasses were oval shaped with thin wire rims that changed from blue to purple depending on the light. I thought the added color made me look artistic and inviting. My eyes also felt healthier without contacts. They rarely felt dry or scratchy, and I didn’t have to rub my eyes as often as I had when wearing contacts. Perhaps contacts had never agreed with me.

With the contacts in I stood back and looked at myself. I looked around the bathroom expecting the sharper focus provided by contacts. Instead, the pink tiled walls looked wavy. Blurred halos surrounded the light fixtures. In the mirror an unfamiliar face

looked back at me: the face of the young woman who once hid under her comforter, too afraid to call anyone for help.

“Damn,” I said to my reflection. “I see better with glasses.”

## Harriet and the City

We followed the super from room to room, inspecting scuffmarks and broken windows. Harriet and I had gone to college together. She'd come to Chicago to pursue her acting career. I'd come to try to make the city my home. I'd moved from Michigan. Harriet had flown in from Texas. Sharing an apartment had been her idea. The Chicago move was my fifth in two years, the eighteenth of my roving military brat existence. Though I'd enjoyed the transient lifestyle, at twenty-four I was eager to settle down. As Harriet and I toured our new apartment, I hoped this move would stick.

The apartment was at the corner of Sunnyside and Hazel. To the east, Montrose Harbor provided Lake Shore Drive joggers a prime view of the skyline. To the west sprawled Graceland Cemetery, the final resting place of Chicagoans whose names graced buildings: McCormick, Pullman, Adler, Wacker. We were less than a mile from Wrigley Field. When my half-sister found out I was moving to Chicago's Uptown, she emailed me a *Chicago Tribune* article about gang wars. Along with news of the latest shootings, the article explained how a new feature of Google Maps marked every gang's territory. Three gangs claimed my neighborhood.

Within a month I regretted my choice of roommate. Chicago was Harriet's first time away from family or college. The first week her mother stayed with us. When she left,

Harriet seemed lost. She hovered in my bedroom, making small talk while I applied for jobs on my laptop. Whenever I left the apartment she would tag along.

I wouldn't have minded Harriet's clinging had we been better matched. Harriet was morose, quiet, ambling. I was excitable, outgoing, fast-paced. Harriet never picked up after herself. She wouldn't put away her food (chicken with pasta, Chinese takeout, unfinished sandwiches) or take out the garbage. She rarely washed dishes. Compared to her, I was a neat freak, Turner to her Hooch. A month into our communal living, I held three part-time jobs. Cleaning up after Harriet was Job #4.

Harriet had never learned to cook. Growing up, her mother and grandmother did everything. I showed her how to slice a potato and to wait for water to boil. Over the phone, her grandmother taught her how to fry. Since then, the apartment felt moist and sticky. Countertops glistened with oily residue. The smell of hot grease clung to the walls.

I came back to the apartment one night, exhausted from working double shifts. Pops of bubbling vegetable oil greeted me at the door. Harriet stood hunched over the stove, dangling a slotted spoon. Dirty dishes piled in the sink. I waved to her before shutting my bedroom door. I flopped onto the bed. Through the door I heard Harriet add more dishes to the sink and trudge to her room. Minutes later the fire alarm sounded.

I ran into the kitchen, but saw no smoke. I checked the stovetop, oven, and microwave. Everything was off. The fire alarm screeched in the hallway between the kitchen and my bedroom door. I climbed onto a bar stool and pressed the alarm's reset button. The screeching stopped. From atop the stool I surveyed the area. Beyond the living room, Harriet's door burst open. She ran towards me, waving a plank of wood.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“The fire alarm was going off.”

I gestured to the barstool. “Why do you think I’m up here?”

She lowered the plank.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“I was going to hit the alarm with it.”

Before going to bed that night I went to the bathroom and found the toilet unflushed. I’d grown used to seeing Harriet’s shit. The building’s plumbing was old; to flush the toilet you had to hold the handle down, a bit of wisdom that, apparently, surpassed Harriet’s learning curve.

I knocked on her door. She sat on her bed, the plank of wood propped against the mattress. “You’re still not flushing all the way.”

“I pressed the lever,” she said.

“You need to hold it down.”

“I did.”

“You need to hold it longer.”

She sighed. Her mousy brown hair hung frizzy and unkempt below her breasts. Her skin was pale. Her shoulders slouched. She looked tired despite sleeping past noon and not leaving the apartment for days. For two weeks she’d worn the same white t-shirt and purple plaid pajama shorts. I wondered how often she showered.

“I’d really appreciate it,” I said.

The next morning, three turds gazed up at me from the bowl.

By the turn of the New Year, my feelings of regret turned into hate. Harriet continued to leave the toilet un-flushed and the dishes unwashed. She left empty takeout containers strewn around the living room. She left baking dishes in the shower and left clumps of hair stuck to the inside walls of the fridge. I sought revenge in small ways: stealing handfuls of her Goldfish crackers, pouring out her vegetable oil, slamming the door when I left for work at six a.m. The actions were petty, but they made me feel better.

I wondered if Harriet's filth resulted from a sheltered childhood or depression. We had both grown up as only children, a birth order known for being spoiled. Harriet's father died when she was an infant. His parents took Harriet and her mother into their home. Harriet idolized her grandmother. She'd told me how, thanks to her, she and her mother never wanted for anything. Whenever Harriet spoke of Texas, she looked down and twirled the ends of her hair.

Like Harriet, I had also been nervous the first time I moved to Chicago. I had relatives in the suburbs, but I'd never been close to them growing up. I felt alone. My theatre internship only needed me ten hours a week. The excessive free time heightened my loneliness. To conquer my wallowing, I threw myself at the city. I got two jobs and joined Meetup groups. Soon my schedule was so packed that I slept during what little downtime I had.

Watching Harriet laze about every day reminded me of how I could have turned out had I continued to wallow. I began avoiding the apartment. Whether I worked or not, I left before Harriet woke up. I didn't return until she was asleep. I packed my schedule with work and Meetup groups. I hung out with coworkers and new friends, something

that normally took me half a year to work up to. I trekked for miles around the city and rode the CTA back and forth.

Before, when I moved to a new place, it took me years to feel at home. By then I was ready to leave. When I'd moved back to Chicago, into the apartment with Harriet, I didn't know if I'd want to stay in Chicago or not. Given my track record, I assumed I wouldn't. From the first day we moved in, while I searched for jobs in Chicago I also searched for jobs elsewhere: Alaska, California, Oregon—somewhere I hadn't lived. After living with Harriet for four months, I had immersed myself in Chicago so heavily that I didn't want to leave. It was home. In other towns I'd always felt like a tourist; in Chicago I felt like a local.

While I fell in love with the Windy City, Harriet holed herself up in her room. She grew paler. She'd had close friends in college, but in Chicago she rarely went out. Where I'd barreled my way out of loneliness, Harriet walked timidly, constantly looking behind her. I wanted to drag her out of her funk, but the more her trash grew, the less I cared.

By spring, our relationship had deteriorated to nods in the hallway. Every night I called my boyfriend, Ross, to bemoan my living situation. He lived in Savannah, GA. "She's like a baby bird, who still needs her mother," I told him one night over the phone. It was March. Harriet was out for once. I sat in the living room, staring out the window.

"Don't you remember what it was like when you first moved to Chicago?" Ross asked. He recalled my sobbing phone calls and how I'd hated having to do everything alone: house chores, cooking, grocery shopping.

"It was hard for you," he said. "It's probably hard for her, too."

“No one was there to hold my hand,” I said. “She shouldn’t need someone either. It’s time to push the baby bird out of the nest.”

Halfway through the summer, Ross visited me in Chicago. Harriet had left for the weekend. After showering one morning I walked into the kitchen to find Ross washing Harriet’s dishes.

“Don’t,” I said, turning off the faucet.

Harriet and I had been living together for nine months. Our sublease was up the following month in August. I had started looking for my own place.

“You’re running out of clean dishes.” Ross nodded toward the cupboard.

“I’m not her mother.”

“That’s why *I’m* washing them.”

I reached for the sponge. He held it over his head and kissed my forehead.

“Finish getting ready,” he said

I stood on my tiptoes reaching for the sponge. Water dripped down Ross’s forearm. “Give me the sponge!” I yelled, climbing him like a tree.

“Hell’s blazes, woman!”

“We are not cleaning up after her!”

I grabbed one of Harriet’s bowls from the sink and hurled it to the floor. Before Ross could stop me, I knocked her loaf of white bread off the shelf. I threw her packets of ramen noodles on the ground. I was about to stomp on them when Ross threw me over his shoulder, carried me into the bedroom, and tossed me on the bed.

“You need to calm down,” he said.

Two weeks later, in July, I signed a lease on an apartment in Rogers Park, a neighborhood known for struggling artists. When I told Harriet I was moving, she stared blankly at me.

A year and a half later, I met my half-sister at a popular brunch spot in the Loop. I had lived in Chicago for nearly two years, the longest I had lived anywhere in eight years. We people-watched as we ate omelets and pumpkin French toast. Outside the window, a familiar set of pajamas caught my eye. It was Harriet, walking several pugs.

“That’s my old roommate,” I said.

“The one who never left the apartment?”

I nodded. We watched her disappear down the street.

I didn’t know Harriet still lived in Chicago. After moving out I deleted her from my phone and Facebook. I forgot about her. Seeing her outside the restaurant, I felt the urge to run after her, to learn what she was up to. Did she still live in our old apartment? Did she have a roommate? I felt guilty for how I had treated her. Memories of her filth still made my blood boil, but maybe things would have been different had I been kinder. I might have spent more time with her in our apartment instead of roaming the city. I might have been less judgmental, gotten to know and maybe understand her better. A lot of things I might have done differently, for her sake. I knew I wouldn’t have found a home in Chicago had I not avoided my home with Harriet. I wondered if I should I thank her for that.

As my sister and I finished our brunch, I kept watching the sidewalk, expecting to see Harriet walk by again, but she didn’t.

## Cloud People

I met my first bigot in the summer of 2015. His name was James. We were both seasonal employees at The Rocky Mountain Inn in Estes Park, Colorado, where I'd moved hoping to find some rejuvenation and clarity in the fresh mountain air 8,000 feet above sea level. Instead, what I found was a suffocating atmosphere of racial prejudice.

The previous year I had uprooted my life in Chicago to attend graduate school in rural Georgia. Halfway through the school year, my assistantship, along with my tuition waiver, was given to another department. I protested, but the administration shrugged its shoulders. My search for a new assistantship came up dry.

A former military brat, I was used to moving around and starting anew. Before the school year ended, I packed up my Honda Fit and drove cross country, straight to Estes Park, unsure if I would return to Georgia in the fall or not.

The first summer seasonals of Estes Park were the Arapaho Indians. They called Estes Park "The Circle." Originally a Great Lakes tribe, they left their Midwestern homes due to threats by the Chippewa and the French. They arrived in Colorado in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and settled near Estes Park and Boulder Valley. In summer they lived in The Circle, camped on the shores of Mary's Lake. In winter they crossed the Continental Divide to the larger and higher elevated Grand Lake, twenty-five miles south. Dogs hunted for

them and pulled their travois. White fur traders at the base of the Rocky Mountains knew them by the small circles tattooed on their bodies. Neighboring Plains tribes called them the Cloud People.

The first European settler to discover The Circle was a gold miner named Joel Estes. Estes settled in the six-square-mile valley, not for the abundance of gold, but for the basin's beauty. He officially founded Estes Park in 1859. He invited friends, who saw the potential to build Dude Ranches and cabins. By 1864, the Arapaho's summer home was advertised as an idyllic tourist destination.

I arrived in Estes Park in early May. James wouldn't arrive until June. Snow lined the roads. A highway sign listed the elevation: 7,522 feet. I wore the only outfit accessible from my bursting suitcase: a tank top, capris, and flip-flops. A rushing river cut the valley in half. On one side grazed a herd of elk on a golf course; on the other stood a cluster of standard tourist shops: Starbucks, jewelry shops, sweater shops, sporting goods, etc. Lumpy Ridge barricaded the northern horizon. Beneath the ridge, the Stanley Hotel, the infamous inspiration of Stephen King's book, *The Shining*, presided over the valley. Several hills rolled around the basin, but they were sand dunes compared to the 10,000-foot looming peaks that surrounded the town.

My naked toes stung. Tire tracks swirled through the snow covered parking lot. The Rocky Mountain Inn sat on a hill that overlooked Lake Estes and a power plant. A group of elk ambled across a busy road. Cars waited until the horse-sized animals were on the sidewalk.

The Rocky Mountain Inn looks like a 1970s ski lodge. Giant stones and knotted wood covers the A-frame exterior. Inside, a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace commands the attention of the entire lobby. Wingback chairs and a pleather sofa congregate in front of the fireplace. Colors are muted, with dark green running through the carpet and walls. I didn't know if I smelled pine or imagined it.

I checked in at the front desk. The office manager—the man who would be my supervisor—greeted me and handed over a Welcome Packet. “You'll live in the hotel until you pass the drug test,” he explained. I asked how long that would take. “Anywhere between one to two weeks.” I had rushed across the country for nothing. Why didn't they tell me over the phone that there would be a one to two week waiting period?

I rolled my luggage to my temporary room in the back building of the hotel. The entire wing stood empty, not yet opened for the season.

Chief Niwot of the Arapahos proclaimed the Curse of Boulder Valley: “People seeing the beauty of this valley will want to stay, and their staying will be the undoing of the beauty.” He was right. As word of the valley's beauty spread among the gold rushers, the number of white settlers grew and so did their conflicts with the native tribes people. To the settlers, the Arapaho were scary because they were different; they seemed foreign although they were as native as the mountain aspens. Illegal squatters demanded the U.S. government relocate the Plains tribes. This act ignited the Colorado War, which ended in the genocide of the Arapaho tribe. The few Arapaho who survived left their mountainous home and joined their allies, the Cheyenne, in Wyoming.

Like the gold rushers, the Rocky Mountain Inn employees were not native to Colorado. They came from far off states like Florida and Minnesota. Most were escaping something: a bad relationship, dysfunctional family, or they simply had nowhere else to go. They recounted stories of abuse and homelessness. My roommate, Tracey, spoke of a boyfriend who beat her until her arm broke. She stayed with him, distancing herself from her family until she abandoned them all together. Homeless, she and her boyfriend squatted in model homes. When he beat her unconscious in her car she fled to a friend's house in Virginia. After a month the friend threw her out and Tracey headed west to Estes Park. My graduate school debacle felt petty in comparison.

The smell of pot lived in the wallpaper of our employee housing. It shouldn't have surprised me that my fellow summer seasonals had come to Colorado largely for legalized marijuana. I'd had too many bad trips in college and no longer smoked, but I liked the laidback vibe I associated with weed. When I'd applied to Estes Park, I pictured groups of people lounging outdoors, strumming guitars, and composting waste for backyard crops. Instead, my coworkers smoked as a form of sustenance. They smoked in the morning, before work, and sometimes during their dinner breaks. At night, I sat and watched them mechanically pass joints around a circle. A few said they couldn't sleep without it. They boasted that legalized pot brought an economic boom to Colorado. They neglected to consider the land. Unlike California and Washington, marijuana fields are harsh on the Colorado soil. A dry desert, Colorado weed thrives only in greenhouses sustained by gallons of water, desiccating an already arid environment.

“I hate all Muslims,” Joe announced over drinks. We sat at a corner table in a local sports bar. It was late. Six of us from the hotel had come to the bar for the cheap drink specials.

“All of them?” I asked.

“The only good Muslim,” he said, taking a swig of beer. *Don’t say a dead one*, I thought. “Is one that has renounced their religion.”

The table was silent. Some nodded. Some sipped their drinks. Everyone at the table was white and American.

“They make me nervous,” Kyle said. “I don’t like that I can’t see their faces.”

“They smell funny.”

I didn’t touch my drink. Their words horrified me. I glanced at the surrounding tables. Could anyone hear them? Why did I seem to be the only one in shock? Someone brought up next year’s presidential election. “I like Trump,” Don said. “I think we should build a wall to keep the Mexicans from coming here.” Joe believed only corrupt candidates won. I nodded until he added that most presidents murdered those who disagreed with them and then used the Secret Service to cover it up.

Tracey tipped her glass at me. “Georgia’s voting for Hillary.” I nodded. Tracey rolled her eyes. “Of course you would. You’re a feminist.” She said *feminist* like the word tasted of soured milk.

“You’re not?” I asked. I thought of her ex-boyfriend and the countless other men that she’d said had abused her. She and I had both lived in the South. I’d told her my view of how the patriarchal culture convinces women to stay with abusive men until it is too late. She had laughed.

Tracey finished the rest of her beer. “Hell no,” she said, sliding out of the booth. “Feminism hasn’t done shit for me. I’ve been raped.”

“I don’t think that was because of feminism,” I said quietly.

She stood and addressed the table. “Anyone wanna smoke?” Everyone grabbed their coats, beers and lighters in hand. I finished my drink. *Thank god for the altitude*, I thought.

I’d worked a seasonal job before. After graduating from college, my boyfriend and I accepted summer jobs at a boutique hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan. I’d gone to a midwestern college and felt right at home on the small island in the middle of Lake Huron. Most of the hotel employees were from Michigan or other Great Lakes states. Foreign workers also flocked to the island, most notably from the Caribbean, Central America, and Eastern Europe. The April thru October season flew by in a haze of beach days and biking on the island’s many wooded trails. I loved Mackinac so much I went back for a second season the following year. It never occurred to me that the island, although in a conservative area, catered to a liberal, hippie crowd—a crowd with which I identified. I didn’t know why. Maybe the island’s ban on cars, and reliance on bikes and horses made everyone feel more in touch with nature. Maybe being six miles from shore offered an idyllic oasis. Or maybe it was just a fluke. Either way, I’d expected the same experience in Colorado.

Every day I found my summer in Colorado to not be the relaxing escape I’d expected. The hotel was poorly managed, and my supervisor often hid in the laundry room so that guests had to yell at the front desk staff. A former hotel employee, fired for threatening to kill a female guest, was given a discounted room. That night he beat his

friend with a lamp, punched holes in the walls, and splattered blood on the bed and door. I struggled with both enjoying my coworkers' company and cringing at their tirades of stereotypes: Jews are cheap, Indians smell like curry, Africans dance around in grass skirts. I'd tell them that what they said wasn't true, but they'd just laughed, finding my words quirky and quaint. Where normally I'd surrounded myself with likeminded people, at the Rocky Mountain Inn I was the one who was different.

I'd experienced being the odd person out before when my parents and I moved to the South. Before moving, I'd grown up near military bases overseas. Living in the South was the first time I was not surrounded by people like me: travelers, movers, kids who were thrown from their comfort zone. My new southern friends had rarely traveled out of state. Everyone attended church and entire families—aunts, uncles, and grandparents—lived in the same county. My agnosticism immediately cast me as the outsider. Schoolmates told me that if you believed in Jesus you went to Heaven, and if you didn't you went to Hell. They saw faith as black and white, with no room for a gray area. After feeling persecuted by my southern community I adopted this black and white view for all social situations. If someone was Christian I labeled them as conservative, bigoted, and likely to damn me to Hell. I categorized non-Christians as tolerant and accepting. Like my classmates, I didn't believe a gray area existed. In college my perception of Christianity shifted and I finally acknowledged the gray area, but in many other aspects of life I still saw things as black and white: there was wrong and right, or good and bad. I thought nothing existed in between.

In Colorado I wrestled with this stark view. My coworkers said bigoted things, but not all of the time. One coworker celebrated the Supreme Court ruling over same-sex

marriage, but claimed all Mexicans were womanizers. A waitress talked about her anger at Obama's deportation of immigrants, but spouted anti-Islam sentiments. A front desk clerk praised Bernie Sanders on Facebook, but scoffed at hotel guests who didn't speak English.

Apart from their views, my coworkers and I got along. We worked well together. Everyone enjoyed hiking and exploring the Rockies. My coworkers weren't the hateful, yelling racists I saw in news coverage of White Supremacist rallies, but they also weren't the progressive hippies I'd connected with in the Midwest. Were they racist or not? Did saying racist things make someone a racist, or did they have to believe the racist things that they said? Was it possible to float somewhere in between? I knew that my own race, Caucasian, allowed me to even debate this topic. Had I been anything other than white I would have dismissed them outright, labeling them racists and bigots immediately. Instead, I had the privilege of ignoring their remarks. I spoke up, but not adamantly. Not only was I alone in my horror, but I also worried I'd discover that they truly believed the things that they said.

I ordered a second drink from the bartender and brought it outside. Everyone sat around a circular table. Kyle offered me his seat. Tracey asked if I wanted to smoke. "Before you leave," she said, "we have to smoke together."

The view of the stars wasn't as clear as it was eight miles west, in the National Park. A small town, Estes Park still suffered from light pollution. The sky was blended ebony and charcoal. Silhouettes of the peaks were pure black. "Have you heard back from your school?" Kyle asked. I shook my head. "That's bullshit," he said. "They'd be

lucky to have you.” Tracey asked if he’d read my latest blog post. She pulled it up on her phone and read it to the group.

In June, Kyle put in his two-weeks notice. James was hired immediately. During our first shift together, James stayed in the side office and answered reservation calls. A lull in check-ins allowed me to grab my Nalgene from the shelf above the desk where James sat. The high altitude forced me to hydrate every hour. I unscrewed the cap and drank. James was on the phone.

“Ma’am, I’m going to put you on hold,” he said. He pressed the phone to his chest and turned to me. “I’m trying to make a reservation, but the computer won’t let me.”

I bent to look at the computer screen. “There’s your problem,” I said, pointing to a dropdown box. “You’ve told the reservation system that you want to put nine people into one room.” James stared at me blankly. “We don’t have a room that accommodates nine people,” I explained.

“But they’re Asian.” The Hold button on the phone’s base wasn’t lit. “They can compact.”

I re-shelved my Nalgene, narrowly swiping James’s face. “That is unbelievably racist.” I moved him aside and fixed the occupancy numbers. “We have two suites. Each room can take up to five people.”

James spoke into the receiver for a few seconds. He was silent and then hung up the phone without saying goodbye. He turned to me. “She said, ‘Oh we so sa-wee, we no stay der.’” He clasped his hands together and bowed. He smiled as he sat back up.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

He shrugged. "It's funny."

Our next four hours together were strained. James continually asked why I was so upset about his Asian comment.

"I just don't see a problem with race in this country," he said.

I mentioned the rash of police shootings against African American men.

"Give me a break," he said. "That all has to do with economics."

"What did economics have to do with a teenager going into a church in Charleston and shooting a Bible group?" I asked.

"That had nothing to do with race." He explained that the African American community lacked father figures, and that somehow led to the racial tensions sweeping the U.S. He further explained that he had dropped out of college when his professor, a black woman, gave a biased version of the Civil Rights Movement.

Unlike my other coworkers, I labeled James immediately: racist. Whereas everyone else confused me as to whether they actually believed the things they said, the easy and almost gleeful way James spoke signified he was serious.

"We need to stop talking," I said. The lobby was empty, but I worried about a guest lurking in the side hallway. "This is inappropriate work conversation."

"Why are you mad?"

"Clearly you and I think very differently."

"Because I'm right and you're wrong?"

I left to take my half hour dinner break.

That evening, as usual, everyone from the hotel went to the bar. James followed. He sat at the end of the bar and drank alone. Tracey and I watched him down three

Guinness pints in thirty minutes. “You might want to slow down,” she told him. “Your tolerance is lower at this altitude.” James kept drinking. At the end of the night, he covered my tab. “To apologize for what I said about the Asians,” he said.

Back at our employee housing the party continued. We stood outside drinking or smoking. I went to my room to grab a glass. Across the hall James’s door was ajar. He lay like a starfish on his bare mattress. A yellow blob spilled from his head. I pushed the door open. “James?” He lay face up and shirtless. His luggage was still packed and the room was barren. The yellow blob was puke.

D.A.R.E. videos from grade school warn kids about alcohol binges. Cartoon animals—or maybe it was a cartoon cop—recounted stories of star athletes or straight-A students who drank too much and died while choking on their own vomit. *He’s an adult*, I told myself, *he made this decision*. I recounted our shift together. Wouldn’t the world be a better place with one less racist? Everyone was outside. No one would know that I had walked into his room.

His chest rose and fell. “James,” I said. “Sit up.” He didn’t move. I kicked the corner of his mattress. “James!”

He opened his eyes. “What do you want?” he said.

“You need to sit up.”

He lifted his head. “Why?”

“So you won’t choke to death.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed. Vomit clung to his face and neck. “Stand up,” I said.

“Why do you even care?”

“I don’t.” He looked like he was going to puke again. “But I don’t want someone to find your dead body.”

He walked into the bathroom and slammed the door.

I counted down the days until I could leave Estes Park. I gave up on finding an assistantship and made plans to return to Chicago. My past jobs were still open. Apartment listings with fall leases slowly populated Craigslist.

The Rocky Mountain Irish Festival was in full swing. Visitors from Europe flocked to Estes Park to take part in the jubilee. The Rocky Mountain Inn was booked solid with festival participants. On the last night of the festival Tracey and I went to our regular bar to hang out with a few of the guests. Tracey met an Englishman she fancied. I chatted with an Irishman named Liam. Across the room, James sat at the bar alone, drinking Guinness.

Tracey and the Englishman left. I stayed with Liam. James put on his coat and headed towards the exit. Two weeks had passed since I’d found him sprawled in a pool of his own vomit. He stopped in front of me. He was unsteady on his feet; his eyes half closed. I introduced Liam as a hotel guest.

“You’re from Ireland?” James asked.

Liam nodded.

“Ireland sold out.” James launched into a rant about how Ireland shouldn’t have joined the European Union. Liam continued to nod. I snapped my fingers. “Stop bothering the guest,” I said. James stared as if noticing me for the first time. “Why do you

even care about Ireland?" I asked. "I heard you burned your passport. It's not like you can go to Ireland now."

"You burned your passport?" Liam asked.

"Yes, I did." James was triumphant. "The U.S. government isn't going to tell me where I can and can't go."

"How are you ever going to travel?" I asked.

"I'll hop a ship."

I laughed. "That's a fantastic idea post 9/11. Maybe you'll get shot."

James's face reddened. He was standing too close. I knew I shouldn't be egging him on, but I was livid. Everything from the year seemed to swirl into his face. I wasn't going back to school. I had uprooted my life and wasted a year in rural Georgia. The summer in Colorado was supposed to clear my head, but I felt cloudier than ever.

James pointed at my chest. "From the moment I met you, I knew I wasn't going to like you."

"The feeling was mutual."

Liam took a long slow swallow of his beer.

"You want to know why?"

"Why?"

James leaned close. There were only inches between us. "You're one of those fucked up liberal people with fucked up views." Spittle hit my face. "Feminism and gay rights—that shit is sick."

Liam froze mid-sip. He was drinking a local brew as opposed to the Guinness he preferred back in Dublin. James wobbled like a punching bag with a weighted base. "It's

fucking sick,” he continued. “The government should have no say in trying to force that on the states.” He lifted his hands. “If we weren’t in public, I would hit you.” He cupped his hands and mimed grabbing my neck.

Liam set his glass down and put a hand on my arm, placing a barrier between James and me. “Can I walk you home?” I nodded and stood, knocking James to the side. On the walk back to the hotel, Liam commented on James’s anger. “He seems unstable,” he said. I told Liam about the arguments James and I had at the front desk.

“You were very polite,” Liam said.

“We have to work together. I’m trying not to have a miserable summer.”

We reached the front of the hotel. “With a guy like that, sometimes women are too polite.” I nodded. I couldn’t admit that a part of me wanted James to hit me, just so I could hit him back.

The next day I filed a complaint with the hotel manager. He leaned back in his chair. “He just came over and said he wanted to hit you?” he asked.

“No. First he berated me. Then he threatened to hit me.”

“And you don’t think he meant hit *on* you?”

“No,” I said. “He wanted to punch me.”

The manager clasped his hands behind his head. “What did you say to make him berate you?”

The same anger that James felt towards me, I felt towards my boss. Why did it matter what I had said to James? Why did it matter what the fight was about? Wasn’t being drunk and belligerent in front of a hotel guest enough? Wasn’t threatening me enough?

The hotel manager leaned forward in his chair. His hand neared a pen, but didn't grab it. "We can't fire someone for being a jerk."

"He made fun of a guest for being Catholic," I said. "He said the Catholic Church is nothing but a donut factory for fat, old people. That guest then had dinner with the mayor and complained about it."

"I heard about that," the manager said. "Estes is a small town."

"But you still want James to work here?"

"There are just some people in this world who you wouldn't want to have a beer with."

That night, while James and I worked together in silence, I drafted my resignation letter. As I did, a pair of elk outside the lobby windows ate from some trees. One tripped the sensor of the automatic sliding door. She stuck her head inside the atrium and sniffed. I would miss the uniqueness of Estes Park. Animals barely noticed the human presence all around them. Mountains stretched the horizon. Peaks twelve miles across the valley seemed hundreds of miles away due to their size. Landscape hues ranged from dark blue mountain shadows to bright green fir trees and patches of untouched snow. The large, smooth ridges that circled the valley gave the impression that everything was vast and ancient. The thin air reminded me that we were on the same plain as the clouds.

I awoke the next morning to an email offering me a new graduate assistantship. The pressure that had settled inside my ribcage for six months collapsed. It was as if I had popped a rejuvenating oxygen capsule. Securing the assistantship meant I could fulfill my contract at the Rocky Mountain Inn if I wanted to. If I left in August, I would make it

back to Georgia just before classes started. That afternoon I still submitted my two-weeks notice.

My last shift ended at eleven p.m. I planned to leave Estes Park without any goodbyes. My car was already packed so that I could leave the next morning. I changed out of my uniform and shoved it in a garbage bag to return to the management the next day. While I packed my remaining items, my cell phone buzzed. *Come down the hall*, Tracey texted. I padded down the hallway towards the only open room. An orange light flickered against the door.

“Happy Georgia Fest!”

Everyone from the hotel was there. The room was lit with candles: purple, my favorite color. There were cases of hard ciders and Fireball whiskey, my favorite drink combination. Michael Buble’s “Georgia on My Mind” crooned in the background. A small table presented chocolate cake, a yellow rose, and a hand drawn sign: “May your travels be as beautiful and lively as you are (if that’s even possible). We’re going to miss you!”

We partied like it was everyone’s last night in Estes Park. We ate cake and listened to any song with the word “Georgia” in it. James sat in a corner eating a piece of cake by himself. I looked around the room and wondered if my coworkers and I were as different as I thought. We were equally narrow-minded, but in different ways. Did that make us the same? They couldn’t tolerate people different than them, just like I couldn’t tolerate people different than me. Did it matter whether or not they believed the racist things they said? No. It didn’t matter. Giving voice to the bigotry is just as bad as believing it.

At the end of the night, as everyone headed to bed, I stood outside the hotel and stared at the sky. The black peaks of the mountains were faint against the halo of the fluorescent streetlights. No stars shown through the town's lights. Only from within the gates of the protected National Park could one see the untouched, nighttime beauty of the Rockies. Inside the park, Chief Niwot's words about the beauty of the valley rang true: the landscape did make me want to stay. Outside the gates, however, the beauty—and the spell—was undone.

## Plunging into the Fissure

Wearing our dry suits, my boyfriend Ross and I looked across the gravel parking lot and the winding path that led to the banks of Thingvallavatn, Iceland's largest natural lake. At the northern tip of the lake, a fissure full of glacial melt cut through the land, pouring icy water into the lagoon. Ross and I had come to snorkel in that fissure.

Between fifty and seventy suited people stood in the small round parking lot. A gray sky made the landscape look dark and wet. Thingvellir National Park's flat green and brown birch woodland stretched for miles around us. Sections of the horizon ended with snow covered peaks. Snorkelers and divers jumped up and down, warming their bodies.

We pulled at the necks of our dry suits and squatted, releasing air pockets that could cause leaks. Alex, the lead snorkel guide, warned that leakage could lead to hypothermia or frostbite. We stood. The suits suctioned to our bodies like vacuum-sealed freezer bags. Beneath our dry suits we wore tight, furry jumpers nicknamed "Teddy Bear" suits, because, as our van driver Gordon put it, "everyone looks so fluffy and huggable!"

I waddled side-to-side, penguin-like. As if two suits weren't enough, we each wore fleece-lined long underwear, too. I hoped the layers would insulate me like a

penguin's feathers. Guides fitted plastic bands around our necks and wrists. A young woman wearing an orange earflap beanie stood on a platform to reach my neck.

“Can you breath?” she asked, tightening the plastic collar.

I shoved the tip of my finger between the ring and my suit. “I think so. How tight should it be?”

“It should feel snug, but you shouldn't struggle to breathe.”

I explained that I didn't know if my breathing felt smothered because I was thinking about it, or because it actually was. “It's fine,” I said, thinking *if I start passing out I'll grab Ross*.

Our group of twelve gathered into a circle around Alex. He explained what would happen next. The entrance to the Silfra fissure was a quarter-mile walk from the parking lot. We'd have to wait in line as other tour groups plunged into the glacial melt. When our turn came, we'd enter the water one at a time and float through the fissure as a group.

“Has anyone never snorkeled before?” Alex asked.

A Canadian couple raised their hands. Alex went through the steps of securing the mask and breathing through the snorkel.

The temperature climbed to forty degrees Fahrenheit. On the drive into Thingvellir National Park we'd passed fresh snow. Gordon said the weather was normal for March. He'd regaled van passengers with stories about the house he'd recently bought, breweries opening in Iceland, and his sisters' love of the country's national dish: Kæstur hákarl (fermented shark). Ross wanted to try the dish.

Ross stood next to me, staring blankly at the black gravel. He tended to go mute when nervous. I nudged him.

“Excited?”

“Sure.” He gave a weak smile. I might as well have asked if he was excited to have his teeth cleaned.

I squeezed his arm.

Ross and I had been dating for five years when we traveled to Iceland for my Spring Break. I saw the trip as the make-or-break point of our relationship: either we’d unite in our differences or we’d let them push us apart, just like the fissure was slowly pushing Iceland apart.

At twenty-seven years old, I’d known Ross for nearly half of my life. We’d met in high school and started dating after we had graduated college. Dating revealed cracks in our relationship that hadn’t surfaced in our friendship. The biggest rift: traveling. A born-and-raised Southerner, Ross planned to find a good engineering job and settle down. He dreamed of a house in the country with no neighbors, and a shooting range in his backyard. A military brat, I hoped to perpetuate the nomadic lifestyle of my childhood, traveling and moving from country to country. I preferred cities: large cities with crowded subways and tall apartment buildings.

For three years of our relationship we’d lived 1,000 miles apart: Ross in Savannah, GA and me in Chicago, IL. During this time we saw each other for one weekend every two months. Ross didn’t have enough vacation time for longer stays. I worked two part-time jobs and couldn’t afford time off. We spent each visit giddy and intertwined like newly weds. Apart, we settled back into our separate lives. Overtime this

cycle and the distance wore us down. We had the same fight over and over: I accused Ross of being a provincial stick-in-the-mud; he called me flighty and unstable.

Two and a half years into our long distant relationship the cycle finally broke. Ross cancelled his New Years Eve trip to Chicago. He said he was sick, but I took it personally. Before Thanksgiving I had invited him join my parents and I on a spring trip to Ireland. Ross still hadn't committed. Cancelling his NYE plans pushed me over the edge.

We spoke on the phone a week after NYE. "Why haven't you bought your tickets to Ireland?" I asked Ross. I sat in my Chicago apartment getting ready for work. Ross drove on I-95 to his parents' house.

"I'm thinking about it," he said.

"What's there to think about? It's Ireland. How could you not want to go there?"

"It's not a question of *want*. I don't know if I'll have time."

"But you have time to drive to your parents' house every weekend?"

"That's not the same thing."

The argument escalated until Ross finally admitted he didn't want to go to Ireland. It wasn't about traveling; it was about me. My wanderlust exhausted him. He felt forced to be someone he wasn't. I hung up before he finished.

Weeks later we made up. We'd known and loved each other too long to give up so quickly. Ross booked a ticket to Chicago and a ticket to Ireland. I did my usual pre-travel researching and planning for Ireland, but every time I opened a guidebook all I could think about was Ross. I wondered if we were struggling through a relationship worth saving or prolonging an inevitable split. Was I really forcing him to be someone he

wasn't, or was I, as I believed, helping him discover a desire he didn't know he had? I planned to dedicate my life to traveling. If Ross truly didn't share that same passion (or didn't even share half of it), weren't we better off apart?

In Ireland I got an acceptance email to a graduate program in Georgia. I needed the higher degree and the school was near Ross: 160 miles. In order for our relationship to survive, one of us had to move closer, even if it was just temporary. Being the nomad, I felt it had to be me.

Five months after we returned from Ireland, Ross and I sat in the living room of my new graduate school apartment. I'd been in the Peach State for two weeks. Classes started the following week.

"After I graduate I'm moving to Asia," I said.

Unpacked boxes surrounded us.

"Asia is far," Ross said.

"I'll be in Georgia for three years. Then I'm leaving. You can come with me or not, but I'm not doing long distance again."

He nodded.

I saw the countdown to graduation as the countdown on our relationship. I didn't know if Ross would move to Asia or not. Emails to him listing job opportunities were replied to with vague responses. I planned the Spring Break trip to Iceland during my second school year. It was as a last ditch effort to awaken the travel bug in Ross, and see if we were meant to be or not. I knew it could also be our last trip as a couple.

We walked in pairs to the entrance of the fissure. The layers made it hard to bend our knees. Five groups queued ahead of us. The tours varied between snorkelers and divers. I had wanted to scuba dive, but my graduate school budget limited me to snorkeling.

Iceland sits on the Mid-Atlantic ridge. The rifts of the ridge are noticeable throughout the country, with some of the most prominent spots being canyons and fissures full of glacier runoff in Thingvellir. The Silfra fissure advertised itself as the spot where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates touched. Gordan had jested, “For the North Americans in the group, it’s like you never left home!” *There are even places where [divers] can actually touch both continents at the same time*, I’d read on the Silfra website when researching the trip. According to the orange beanie guide, this wasn’t entirely true. “The plates move apart about two centimeters every year,” she said. “You’re not standing on two separate continents. You’re standing where the continents are pulling apart: brand new ground.”

On a hill overlooking the entrance of the fissure we watched each group take the icy plunge. Some shrieked and breathed rapidly. A small boy three groups behind us cried. The anticipation of the swim scared him. A Spanish woman asked her guide if she could dive without her gloves.

“You can,” the guide said. “But you will get frostbite.”

Ross looked at the water. It rippled black and navy blue. We could see yellow boulders beneath the surface. A school of snorkelers floated towards the opening of Thingvallavatan Lake. Their black bodies grazed the reflective surface, looking as though they floated in the overcast sky rather than in a Mid-Atlantic rift.

I linked my arm through the bend in Ross’s elbow. “It’s going to be great,” I said.

“It’s going to be cold.”

“You’ve swum in Lake Huron.”

“Lake Huron wasn’t thirty-two degrees.”

“But you were only in swim trunks. Now you’re in a dry suit, a Teddy Bear suit, and long underwear, so it sort of evens out?”

He kept watching the snorkelers. I’d hoped he’d be excited as the plunge neared. Instead, fifteen minutes before we were to enter the clear water, he looked as if he might throw up.

The divers in front of us adjusted their gear and entered the glacial melt one at a time. Our group was next. We helped each other into our flippers and masks. Only our lips would be exposed to the water.

We waddled single-file to the entrance of the fissure. Alex stood at the top of the ladder that dropped into the glacial melt. He told us to float in place once we entered the water. A guide would swim over and hug us. “To release any extra air and prevent leaks,” Alex said.

During the flippers and masks shuffle Ross and I got separated. I looked at a tall, broad shouldered figure two people ahead of me. Ross? Everyone looked like a crash test dummy. My gloves prevented me from removing my snorkel. *Turn around*, I willed the tall figure. I wanted to give him a reassuring thumbs-up. He didn’t budge. We entered the water one-by-one. By the time everyone started paddling through the fissure, I had no idea if Ross was one person in front of me or five.

I had expected to see fish in the fissure, but the moment the frigid water touched my lips I realized no fish could survive those temperatures. Only arctic mammals, whales and seals, could handle water that cold. I kicked my flippers. According to the park's website, the fissure had the clearest water in the world. The frigid temperature of the glacial melt provided clear views one hundred meters down.

Beneath the water, beige and yellow boulders narrowed into aquamarine and cerulean caverns. Their depth reminded me of canyons. In the deep blue strip below I could just make out rocks on the ground floor. Silver light blended the blues and greens like a glass kaleidoscope of cool colors. Swaths of bright turquoise and lime green danced along the rocky walls. Stones closest to the surface shown chartreuse. Small hairs of algae waved as we floated past.

I remembered what the orange beanie guide had said: I wasn't looking at two tectonic plates, but the space between the plates. *Brand new ground*. The rocks seemed ancient, but, geologically, they were newborns. Still, looking at the walls of the fissure, I couldn't help but envision them as separate continents.

Ross and I were like the fissure: two different continents slowly pushing apart, but held together by an expanding rift. I wondered if the fissure would eventually break and split the land in two, or would it continue to grow and create new land? Did both plates move, or did one push while the other remained fixed? For as much as I loved traveling and adapting to new lands, in our relationship only Ross shifted and adapted. He changed just like Iceland's landscape changed. I stayed immobile, refusing to budge. To bend meant to compromise on the life I had dreamt for myself—a life filled with travel and adventure. The thought of staying in one place, and not seeing as much of the world as

possible, terrified me because it meant an unfulfilled, regretful life. I loved Ross, but didn't know if I loved him enough to compromise my wanderlust. I didn't know if I loved anyone that much.

The swim lasted thirty minutes. Any longer and we would have lost our lips. We swam in a J-shape from the fissure entrance to the lakeside lagoon. Alex and another guide helped snorkelers walk awkwardly out of the water. I scanned the small pool. Still no Ross. Alex hoisted me up with one hand. I pulled the mask off my face and felt the relief from the release of pressure. A tall suited snorkeler shuffled next to me.

“Have fun?” Ross's pink face smiled.

“That was awesome,” I said, happy that the excursion did not disappoint. “You?”

He kissed my numb lips. “Let's go get changed.”

Two days after snorkeling, Ross and I sat in an apartment in Stykkishólmur, a coastal town north of Reykjavik. We'd booked a small room at a Bed and Breakfast, but the owner upgraded us to the private studio apartment upon arrival. We drank Icelandic wine and beer and watched the night sky for the Aurora Borealis. Ross wanted to see the Auroras as much as I had wanted to go snorkeling. Unfortunately, March wasn't the best time to see the night sky light up.

“Want to use the hot tub?” Ross asked.

I looked at him through the brim of my wine glass. The hot tub sat on the other side of the building. The walk would take nearly twenty seconds—twenty very cold seconds. I'd psyched myself up for snorkeling while wearing several layers of material. I

was not ready to stand soaking wet, in a bathing suit, in weather ripe for snowing. The clock read 23:00.

“Now?” I said. “It’s thirty degrees outside.”

“It’ll make the water in the hot tub feel great.”

“It’s cold.”

“So says the woman who wanted to swim in glacial melt.”

I swirled the wine in my glass.

“*I’m* going to go in the hot tub,” Ross said, standing. “You can come with me or not.” He kissed my forehead.

I downed my wine, hoping for some liquid courage. Ross came back to the sitting room. He wore green swim trunks and no shirt. He grabbed a clean towel and left the key to the apartment. After a minute alone I got up and put on my bathing suit. Where Ross had only worn his trunks and flip-flops, I bundled in my pajama pants, winter coat, and boots. Breathing rapidly and jumping up and down, I darted outside and around the building.

No lights shown around the hot tub. I could just make out the shape of Ross’s head and shoulders above the water. I disrobed and climbed clumsily into the tub. The cold stung too bitterly to bother looking for steps or a stool. In the steaming water I huddled into a ball, careful not to get my hair wet.

We sat in the tub, listening to the silence of the small town. I snuggled against Ross’s chest. Tomorrow we planned to visit a farm that made *Kæstur hákarl*.

“Still believe I don’t like to travel?” Ross asked.

I laughed. “We’ll see what happens when I graduate.”

“Still thinking about Asia?”

“Yes.”

The wind blew. I slid further into the tub until the hot water grazed my chin.

“Vietnam would be nice,” Ross said.

We stared at the sky. To the west a chartreuse dot rolled across the black expanse.

It cut through the darkness, creating a green and blue river in its wake.

## Solo Female Traveler

The AirBnB listing, “Jeff’s Luxury Apartment,” seemed perfect: a private waterfront condo, a pool and an exercise room, all at an affordable price. The only hitch: Jeff. His photo showed a thirty-something guy with a square jaw and smiling face. The profile reminded me of the CouchSurfing host who murdered a girl I knew from college: Dahlia.

In August 2015, two years before I found Jeff’s AirBnB listing, I received an invitation to join the Facebook Group: Find Dahlia. I knew Dahlia from Kalamazoo College. In the group’s photo she looked exactly as she had then: petite, olive skin, black hair, bright eyes, and a shy warm smile. She’d been known as an artist, traveler, and a humanitarian.

Dahlia went missing that summer in Nepal, where she’d been traveling solo. She’d arrived in July to assist with relief efforts for the April 2015 earthquake. She hadn’t been heard from since August 4<sup>th</sup>. The U.S. Embassy was alerted; Dahlia’s father flew to Nepal to search for her.

Soon, friends on Facebook reported that Dahlia had been murdered in a town 125 miles northwest of Kathmandu. She’d stayed with a man she’d met on CouchSurfing, a website offering low-cost lodging. Police had questioned the host, who said that Dahlia had stayed at his home for two nights. Nepal’s Central Bureau of Investigation tracked Dahlia’s iPhone to the host. After days of interrogation, the host confessed to beating

Dahlia to death with a hammer and wooden rod. Authorities found rope, clothing, and a backpack near the spot where he'd dumped her body into the Seti River. In his apartment, they found trace amounts of her blood.

Women take risks when traveling alone. Guidebooks contain advice just for women.

Lonely Planet says, “[L]ocal men often consider foreign women to be exempt from their own society’s rules of conduct.”<sup>1</sup> Rick Steves specifies: “[B]e aware that in the Mediterranean world, when you smile and look a man in the eyes, it’s often considered an invitation.”<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of State cautions women on dressing immodestly, taking public transportation, talking to strangers, and to avoid “dark, isolated areas.”

The world is risky for solo, or even pairs of, female travelers; two Argentinian women were sexually assaulted and killed while traveling in Ecuador in 2016. Before Dahlia’s murder, I never heeded the warnings for female travelers. I was horrified about reported attacks, but I felt impervious as I tried to guess what might have gone wrong. Was there a box on the imaginary How To Be a Safe Traveler checklist that these women didn’t mark? Did they allow themselves to end up in the wrong place? I’d think about the women and then I’d go back to my own travel planning.

Dahlia’s death haunted me. I imagined her last moments. I started locking my bedroom door. I read every article about her that surfaced online: *NPR*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Himalayan Times*. A year went by and I still couldn’t shake her from my mind. We hadn’t been close. We weren’t Facebook friends, which, for

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<sup>1</sup> Staff, Lonely Planet Publications. *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring*. N.p.: Lonely Planet Publications, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Extra Tips for Solo Women Travelers.” *Extra Tips for Solo Women Travelers by Rick Steves*. Rick Steves’ Europe, Inc., n.d. 06 Feb.

<sup>2</sup> “Extra Tips for Solo Women Travelers.” *Extra Tips for Solo Women Travelers by Rick Steves*. Rick Steves’ Europe, Inc., n.d. 06 Feb. 2017.

millennials, means you're barely acquainted. Had it not been for her disappearance, there's every chance I never would have thought of Dahlia again.

As I re-read articles and browsed her blog it finally hit me. I couldn't escape thoughts of Dahlia because I felt like I was Dahlia.

I grew up a traveler. My parents worked for the U.S. Department of Defense. By the time I was ten we had lived in four different countries. When I applied to colleges, I chose Kalamazoo for their expansive study abroad program. The school attracts radical, feminist students with a keen interest in travel. Dahlia studied abroad in Ecuador. I went to Scotland.

While living in the UK I traveled solo, trekking 545 miles every other weekend to visit my boyfriend. While he worked, I explored London. I returned to his dorm late at night. I spent a week in Barcelona with a friend. At night, I walked one-mile to the nearest Internet café to Skype with my parents. The calls ended between midnight and two a.m. My mother implored me not to walk back alone.

"It's a big city," she said. "Please get a taxi."

"I'm fine," I said. "I'll walk fast."

I ignored concerns, too, when a girlfriend and I backpacked around Europe. We didn't think we were taking any risks because we were together. Greece, the first leg of our trip, proved us wrong. In Athens, groups of men followed us; one even stalked us into a café until a barista chased him out. On Santorini, two men cornered us in a deserted alley, cutting us off from other tourists. They retreated only when stray dogs barked at them. In Italy, men catcalled from speeding mopeds, some reaching out their hands. By

the time we boarded an overnight train to Germany—the halfway point of our trip—we jumped if a man talked to us. That night we shared a cramped sleeper room with two men. Neither of us slept.

After college I continued to travel. I often left my friends to do my own exploring, usually at night while everyone else rested. I moved to Chicago and walked everywhere to save on cab fare. In the Rocky and Appalachian Mountains I hiked solo. I knew the dangers I faced being on my own, but I felt invincible. On the imaginary How To Be a Safe Traveler checklist, I double-checked all the boxes: I read reviews, books, and blogs; I left itineraries with my parents; I wore cross-body bags; I secured the chain lock on hotel doors; I sometimes carried mace or a small knife.

Dahlia's death shattered my image of invincibility. She did everything I would have done. Before arriving in Nepal she contacted the CouchSurfing host and met him and his girlfriend for a meal. He had glowing reviews and ratings. An *NPR* article criticized Dahlia for trusting CouchSurfing. The author didn't take into account that Dahlia, only twenty-five-years-old, had grown up comfortable with online travel resources.

As a millennial, I also trust the online sharing economy. I use AirBnB, Uber, and Lyft, companies similar to CouchSurfing. These companies make traveling convenient, affordable, and unique—often providing a “live like a local” vibe. The drawback is they lack the safety checks of licensed hotels and taxis. There is no driving test. Inspectors do not ensure locks are secure or stairs aren't faulty. *The New York Times* reported that a father died while using a rope swing at an AirBnB. In 2015, an American boy traveling in Spain was held hostage by his AirBnB host. When his mother called AirBnB, they

declined to help. Uber's drivers have been accused of rape and vehicular manslaughter. CouchSurfing has a slew of assault charges against its users, including a man in Italy, who drugged and raped his female guests.

Like Dahlia, I trust online reviews, detailed profiles, and exchanges with hosts. I like staying in someone's personal apartment or meeting a driver, who is using Lyft or Uber to pay for school. Trusting the Internet and the share economy is on my How To Be a Safe Traveler checklist. Before Dahlia, I had never considered that checking those boxes could still get me killed.

As I continued to scroll through the positive reviews of Jeff's Luxury Apartment I thought of Dahlia. *Foreign Policy* reported that some of the Nepalese host's reviews were faked; I wondered if Jeff faked any of his. In his profile Jeff wrote, "I will sometimes pop in and out, but [will] generally leave you to the privacy and seclusion of your accommodation." My mouse hovered over the pink "book" button.

I wondered if Dahlia would have completely foregone CouchSurfing had she known the host's intentions. Would she have not gone to Nepal? Would she have stopped traveling solo?

If Dahlia and I are similar, then the answer is no. Dahlia would have still gone to Nepal and continued to travel solo. Female wanderers know the risks are always there. Even traveling with a man is not infallible because couples have also been murdered while abroad.

The best solution is for women to acknowledge the risks, but not change their plans, and to keep traveling as if they are unassailable. Dahlia's death has taught me that I

haven't been a smart traveler; I have been lucky. I am not invincible. No amount of preparation, planning, or box checking can shield me from the dangers facing every female traveler. Still, I accept the risks because I believe it's more important to live my life, and travel, the way I want to. Before Dahlia, fear didn't follow me down dark alleys and empty streets. It will now. Dahlia didn't let the risks stop her, and neither will I.