

At Home Abroad: An exploration into the genres of expatriate literature

By Sarah Marshall Veeder

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Abstract

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This thesis is in two parts, the first part consisting of the creative submission and the second part consisting of the critical submission. The creative portion is titled 'Finding Felicia'. In this diaristic memoir, I recount my first year and a half as an expatriate, living in London while attending Kingston University. During that time, the title character, Felicia, becomes instrumental in my personal growth as well as structuring how I approached expatriation. As friendship with Felicia grows, the realization dawns that I am becoming dependent on her as the cornerstone of the life I am building abroad. However, she is scheduled to leave a year before me. As her departure date nears, the focus turns toward securing my place abroad—applying for visas as well as trying to make sure life would not be entirely empty when Felicia flew back to the States.

The second portion of this thesis consists of the critical submission, 'At Home Abroad: An exploration into the genres of expatriate literature'. The critical thesis is an examination of possible categories within the overarching theme of expatriation. The thesis begins with an exploration of the expatriate literature from the 1920s post-war era through to the Beats living in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s to inform the categories of modern expatriate literature.

The categories I propose split the overarching theme of expatriation into three, with each group representative of the ways in which expatriation might be approached, from narratives that show an intense focus on becoming a part of the new culture to an ambiguity concerning the expatriate's ability to integrate. Where the protagonist of the

texts falls on the spectrum from isolation to community involvement is a major marker of the goals and expectations held by the expatriate, which in turn helps to situate the text within a category. The three categories I propose are the sabbatical, the bohemian, and the trailing spouse expatriate narratives. The sabbatical expatriate narrative, as exemplified by Frances Mayes's Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy (1996), shows the focus of the expatriate to be integration as a pseudo-local, the narratives showing the expatriate's integration process through the use of food, attention to landscape and history, as well as a focus on learning the language, all as ways to further ingratiate themselves into their chosen community. The bohemian expatriate narrative, as exemplified by Ben Lerner's Leaving the Atocha Station (2011), shows the focus of the expatriate to be less on the actual facts of their expatriation, and more on the possibility of creating a new life or experimenting with possible identities. The third category I propose is that of the trailing spouse expatriate narrative, as exemplified by Brigid Keenan's Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse (2005). The trailing spouse expatriate narratives show a different starting point for expatriation—going abroad for work, or for someone else's work—as well as show the possible difficulties of raising a family abroad and the constant sacrifices demanded to maintain the new lifestyle. All these categories address the threats to self and identity that arise with expatriation, but it is how these threats are approached by the expatriate that determines the category.

This research relates to my own creative work as they both explore what it means to be an expatriate today. My creative work challenges the research by complicating different aspects of the three categories of expatriate literature discussed, despite fitting most comfortably within the bohemian narrative category.

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Finding Felicia

It is a very strange sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world, cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by many impediments from retuning to that it has quitted. The charm of adventure sweetens that sensation, the glow of pride warms it: but then the throb of fear disturbs it...

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte

I arrived at Heathrow airport at seven-thirty in the morning, in the middle of September of 2010. I—along with other international students—was due to meet university representatives who would then convey me to the school. The representatives' designated lime-green t-shirts were nowhere to be seen. In fact, the airport was empty. There were a few men standing near the arrivals gate holding signs with names written across them, but there were only one or two people at the coffee stand and a tired looking clerk at the newsagents. I pulled my two large suitcases over to a bank of benches and sat down to wait.

All I could think about was *Jane Eyre*, when she's sitting alone in a parlour, waiting for someone to pick her up for her new position as governess. When no one was there to meet her. I was that inexperienced youth, twenty-two years old and alone in an airport overseas, with no immediate way of contacting anyone at home or in England, with no return ticket, left to wait and have faith that the lime-green t-shirts would appear and lead me to my new life. I certainly had adventure ahead of me and was proud I'd made the trip alone—it was the first time I'd flown by myself—but waiting on that cold bench made me realize how little a step that solo flight had been.

Slowly, other students arrived, distinguishable by the slow steps, the large suitcases, eyes casting desperately around the arrival's hall. Eventually, lime-green t-shirts appeared

and were immediately converged upon. A bouncy young woman checked my name off a list, and I sat down next to the other students to wait for the later arrivals.

The easiest way to talk to strangers, especially when sitting in an airport, is to ask about home.

“You look Scandinavian,” someone said to the girl next to me. She had a round face and dyed black hair, a small stud sparkled in her nose.

“You look French,” she replied. I wouldn’t have been able to pick out their countries based on their features. They all simply appeared young and European, somehow. I wasn’t sure, other than the flare of my jeans, what would mark me as an American.

“What year are you?” I asked the Scandinavian girl.

“First year,” she said. “And you?”

“I’m a grad student,” I said. “Any guesses where I’m from?”

“You just look white American,” someone said. I don’t know what I expected, but I remember being a little disappointed. What made me so American? Why was that disappointing? Was it the word ‘just’? Though they were right, it made me feel plain and featureless. I felt smaller than them, despite the fact I had four extra years of education, they seemed intrinsically bolder, braver, leaving home years before I’d had the courage to. I’d had the chance to go to England straight out of high school but had stayed within three hours of home instead. I wondered if maybe, because Europe was smaller, the distance didn’t have the same effect on them? But distance and time are relative no matter where one lives, and I just wasn’t ready at eighteen.

“So why come to England for college?” I asked, using the incorrect designation.

A moment should be spared here for vocabulary. Having lived in England for eight years, I now have two sets of vocabulary to choose from when discussing higher education.

In America, most bachelor's degrees are four years, so when I first arrived, I tended to use words such as 'freshman', 'sophomore', 'junior', and 'senior' to describe what the English were calling 'first year', 'second year', or 'third year'. Their undergraduate degrees were only three years. In America, 'college' and 'university' are interchangeable. A 'college' is a specific school within a University, or an institution that does not offer post graduate degrees. In England, 'college' (or A Levels) is the equivalent to the last two years of American high school. O.W.L.'s and N.E.W.T.'s at *Hogwarts* were finally starting to make sense.

"A lot of people go overseas for school," the Scandinavian replied. "It's pretty normal. ERASMUS and all."

"What is ERASMUS?" I asked.

"It's the European Union student exchange program."

In the States, most students study abroad for a semester, or a year at most. And those programs are only open to upperclassman. I'd thought about going abroad during university but was too scared to forfeit my social life on the main campus if I did, that all my friends would forget about me, move on. Out of sight, out of mind. I didn't want to miss out on the life I'd built to spend a few months abroad. In the end, the people I knew my freshman year, the people I'd thought I didn't want to leave, would be gone by my senior year anyway. I wished I'd had the courage to go sooner. I was envious of these freshmen, these 'first years.' They'd taken the leap, despite the risk of losing the lives they'd had at home.

Eventually, we followed the lime-green shirts like ducklings dragging suitcases to a coach—a large tour bus—outside the airport and were driven forty-five minutes to Kingston Upon Thames. Staring out the window, half talking to the Norwegian boy next to me, I don't

remember the details of that bus ride, though now I recognize the route, having taken the express bus back and forth from Heathrow what feels like a thousand times. At the time, I was probably more focused on staying awake, staying alert, and staying open to speaking to new people, to actually absorb the sights on the other side of the windows. Now, I can relax enough to take in the sights, notice the names of the places we pass through, sit more deeply in my seat with my backbone at ease. I know that day, it wouldn't have mattered if they had given us a tour of Kingston, I wasn't going to remember any details except that I was looking forward to getting behind a door I could close.

Clayhill, the student halls I would be living in (or what American's would call dorms) was a fifteen-minute walk from the main campus. It consisted of multiple squat buildings surrounding a small central reception building which held mailboxes, washing machines, vending machines and a Ping-Pong table. The individual rooms took me straight back to freshman year at the University of South Carolina, with cinderblock walls and basic furniture. Though instead of having a roommate I would be living alone, and instead of having to share a bathroom with twenty other girls I had my own ensuite and only had to share a kitchen with three other girls. It was a step up for me, and a pretty good deal for someone who's just left home in my opinion. Most importantly I could be alone to recover from sensory overload. All the doors were made of heavy wood and labelled with a blue circle that says "Please Keep Shut", (I don't know if I simply hadn't taken notice of how American fire doors were labelled, or didn't feel the need to hide behind them at home, but the bright blue circles really caught my eye when I first arrived) and the sound that door made when it shut made me feel secure, as though I couldn't be reached by the constant flow of stimuli on the other side. I knew how to be alone, behind a closed door. But that wasn't why I moved to London. I'd moved to London to get out from behind the closed

door, to find a life that would keep me from shrinking into myself. It took me a while to realize that doors are everywhere.

The following evening, I was supposed to attend welcome drinks for international students taking place at a pub in town. There were buses designated for use by Kingston students, distinct from the double decker red buses because they were painted the university colours, blue, grey, and white. I sat in a worn seat by the window as the bus rumbled away from the curb and slowly made its way through the suburban neighbourhood where the dorms were to the main road. It turned down the hill and my stomach slopped against my sides. The window was cool against my forehead and I'd lost track of the conversation going on around me. The bus jerked to a stop outside the school and I turned to Kirsten.

"I have to get off the bus."

"We're not there yet. Are you alright?" Kristen asked. I'd met her at the airport the day before and we'd been sticking together.

I disembarked, Kirsten right behind me, and searched for an entrance into the nearest school building. The saliva was pooling in my mouth as bile forced its way up my throat. Inside the building, signs lined the walls pointing to everything except a restroom. I found a door to a courtyard. Barely registering the small group of people smoking cigarettes, I leaned over a bush and emptied my stomach. Wiping my mouth, I stood up straight and didn't look around before going back through the building to find Kirsten waiting by the front door.

"You alright?"

"I think I need to go back to the dorm," I said, looking for the most logical direction to walk.

“I’ll get the bus back with you,” she said. She had her hand on my arm. I would, the next day, stand with her in line as she registered for classes, because she was nervous about going to the school by herself. She was nineteen and looked freckled by the sun and polished by the California sand. In the next few months we would part ways, find new friend groups and only ever know each other through Facebook until she would eventually de-friend me.

“No, I’ll walk. I don’t think I can stand another bus right now. You go on to the welcome drinks, just tell the others I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you’re ok?”

“I’m just not acclimated yet. Probably don’t need to go drinking either.” I wasn’t sure I should be walking back to the dorm alone, in the dark, in an unfamiliar place, but I didn’t want to be an inconvenience, let alone embarrass myself further.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then?” Kirsten asked.

“Of course, you can tell me all about it.”

The next bus pulled up and Kirsten stepped on and I waved her off. I wrapped my arms around myself, cursing that I hadn’t worn a thicker jacket and set off towards the main campus building. I knew my way from the back entrance and if I could find that I’d know where to start.

The streets were dark with street lamps every few hundred feet and street signs low to the ground. Walking back up the hill to the dorm I broke out into a light sweat; dressing for long walks in chilly weather would take me years to figure out. This was the third time in two days that I’d been sick, and I’d only arrived three days ago. Waking up the second morning I’d tried to drink a glass of apple juice, felt queasy and threw up after my second chewable Pepto-Bismol. Later that day, on the bus into town, I threw up in my mouth twice,

and had to swallow it. There was no other option. Were my meds off from the time change? Was it just basic adjustment or nerves getting the best of me? Was it the fact that I wasn't used to riding on buses? Whatever the cause of sudden sickness, I was happy to be in my single bed, under my cheap comforter, watching episodes of *Gossip Girl* on my laptop, alone.

* * *

My first scheduled event at the school, aside from the welcome drinks I'd missed the night before, was an induction, held in one of the larger lecture rooms that I would only ever see that one time. I was clinging to scheduled events to stave off the panic of not knowing what to do with myself. I'd met some kids around the halls, even spoken to the girls I shared the kitchen with once or twice, but everyone seemed to have so somewhere else to be. There were only so many days to stretch out buying towels and groceries.

Felicia was sitting on the stairs outside of the lecture hall talking to a few people before the induction when I first saw her. I hung back and pulled out the information packet so I'd have something to look at while I listened in and waited for the lecture hall to open.

"Oh yeah, when I tended bar in school, we used to try to do bottle flips all the time, but it didn't always work," she said. Her knees were pulled up to her chest and she tucked her short red hair behind her ears, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, 'so what?' before slouching back into her knees.

"What course are you taking?" A pretty blonde girl asked.

"I'm doing the MA in creative writing," she said.

“I’m doing that course,” I said. “Well, I’m doing the MFA, which is basically the MA plus a year.” I was rambling. Despite this girl’s too-cool demeanor, she was the only other person I’d come across on my course. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to meet someone that might be in my classes. Kirsten was very nice, but we didn’t have a lot in common other than being Americans away from home. I wanted a real connection, someone I could completely relax around. I didn’t know if this girl would be the person to fit that description, but being classmates at least gave us something in common.

“Oh, I’m only doing the one year,” she said. We sat together in the welcome seminar and when it was over everyone flooded out the double doors.

“Well, it was nice to meet you,” Felicia said. “I guess I’ll see you in class.”

I said goodbye and we went down separate hallways. Not a flying start. She probably already has friends, I thought.

I saw her again a few days later at another induction, a creative writing specific induction. Only when the professor started talking did we realize it was an induction for the undergraduate class. Knowing she’d made the same mistake as I had helped me to forgive her air of arrogance, as well as the fact that she said she thought I was from California because I was so tan and blonde.

“This was a pre-wedding, pre-pink-bridesmaids-dress tan. I spent the summer in my grandmother’s yard in South Carolina working on this bad boy,” I explained.

We left the induction and walked together into Kingston. Campus was a small cluster of buildings near the County Hall, a short walk from the Thames and the riverside restaurants. There were canal boats moored on the far side of the river, clustered together in front of the old stone bridge. The walkway was crowded with people, joggers had to dodge toddlers and the elderly who had stopped to feed the swans and there were prams

and buggies everywhere. We escaped into a restaurant, *Ha Ha Bar and Grill*, and followed a waitress to a booth by the window. The actual River Thames was not ten feet away. It felt appropriate to eat fish and chips while sitting next to the river.

“Did that girl Michelle ever find a place to live,” I asked after the waitress had taken our order. Michelle had been sitting next to Felicia when we first met. She was tall, blonde, and very thin. I wanted Felicia to pick me to be her friend, and not Michelle.

“She got in touch with that girl you met on your tour and they found a place in Putney,” she said.

“I can’t imagine coming this far without knowing where you’re going to stay,” I said. I had hardly been able to imagine coming this far with the safety of housing and a pick up at the airport. I still wonder how I did it.

“I had my place booked ages in advance.” Of course, she did, I thought, this girl knows what she’s doing, she’s probably planned this for ages.

“Maybe that’s why I didn’t see your building when I signed up. Maybe it was already full.” Felicia was staying in Kingston proper, within sight of the river and across the road from the shopping mall, Bantalls. I was technically in Surbiton, another town, adjacent to Kingston.

“Have you met all your roommates yet?” she asked.

“One of them is on our course but every time I see her, she ignores me, with obvious effort. I have no idea why. And I can hear her Skyping her husband and complaining about the program already.”

“She sounds like fun. Mine are practically all-American girls, with the odd Greek guy thrown in. So much for getting to mingle with the locals,” she said.

“Guess they figured all the struggling strangers would have more in common. I was so glad to hear you say you were on the creative writing course. Everyone I’d met was an undergraduate.”

The fact that we were surrounded by Americans—in our dorms and, as we would learn later, in our course as well—puzzled me. I’d thought I would immediately be introduced to a number of foreign students—other than the ones I’d met in the airport. Instead, I could not escape the Americans.

“But how embarrassingly desperate did we look being the only post grads in that undergrad welcome seminar. Fucking eager beavers.”

“At least we weren’t alone,” I said.

The waitress appeared carrying two plates of steaming beer-battered fish, chunky chips and a pot of mashed peas. (Vocabulary note: it takes a long time—I still do not always use the correct terms—to get in the habit of saying *chips* when one means *fries* and saying *crisps* when one means *chips*. And *fries* tends to denote skinny *chips*.)

“This feels very British,” I said.

“Isn’t it great?” Felicia was from Kentucky and glad not to be there.

“Doug and I talked about it before we started dating. I told him,” she said, “I’m moving to London and nothing is going to stop me. We sort of tried not to get involved but I ended up living with him for the last few months before I left.”

“And what did your parents think of you coming here?” I asked.

“Mom freaked out. She just knows I’ve gone to a place full of sinners and will probably end up in hell. But she’s known I’m going to hell for years now.”

“My parents are probably relieved I’ve gone. I know they enjoyed having me home after college, but I think they were getting a little worried that I’d never leave again.” I

raised my empty bottle when the waiter walked by, nodding that we'd like another round of the berry flavoured ciders.

"But it sounds like you have a pretty decent relationship with your parents. I don't think I could have lived at home with my mom after having moved out."

"Don't get me wrong it was great, but I know they wanted more for me than to come home after ending a two-year relationship and having no prospects for my future. I was just lost there. I think they were worried about my ability to find a way out." Later I would learn that when my Dad said, *I think we've lost her to London*, my mother would reply *At least we've lost her to something*. Did she really fear I wouldn't find a way? A place? I know that was my fear, but it multiplies when I think of her carrying it as well.

"Here's to being here now," Felicia said, holding up her fresh bottle of cider. "And the real challenge for me will be not getting fat. I love fried food."

"These minted mushy peas aren't too bad," I said.

"Oh no, I don't eat green things," she said.

* * *

I'd been on a sort of date a few days before leaving home. My younger brother and his long-time girlfriend had their wedding at the beginning of August and two weeks later I found myself driving into rural North Carolina to go on a date with one of my brother's groomsmen.

"It's been an honour to pay for your last meal, before you leave," he said from across the booth. *We were in Applebee's.*

"I don't leave for a few more days," I said.

Back in his shared apartment I caught the subtle odour of sweat. I'd met his college roommates at the wedding, and they acknowledged our entrance with nods of the head and shouted hellos.

"You can, you know," he said, "hang out...if you want to."

"Yeah, we're having a bonfire out back in a few," one of the roommates said from the couch.

His ambivalence was obvious. These were my brother's friends. Our date was over.

"Okay, sure," I said. "Bonfire sounds cool."

The fire was lit inside a circle of stones at the edge of the housing complex, next to the tree line. The boys set out camp chairs and dropped a cooler nearby. Someone brought a portable speaker and played the same song—*Stuck Like Glue*—over and over again until his friends made him stop. Other people showed up, girls—I was introduced as Andrew's sister. I gripped my beer, smiled at them, because it is not acceptable to frown at a party, and tried not to zone out staring into the flames.

He let me sleep in his bedroom while he slept on the sofa. In the morning we all went to breakfast at the one café in town. My brother and his wife came in and joined us. After, on the sidewalk outside, having waved to all the others, I said goodbye to my brother. I wouldn't see him until Christmas.

"How was your date?"

"Inconsequential. But I'm glad I got to see you again."

"When do you leave?"

"Two weeks."

"You ready?"

"No."

“You’ll do great.”

“Thanks, little brother.”

“Text when you get home.”

As soon as I hit the highway the tears came. It was all slipping away, everything I was sure of, even the roads I had driven a million times were becoming unfamiliar, no longer my own but a system for someone else to navigate. Every mile was taking me further and further away from the solid ground of my childhood to an uncertain future overseas. The highway was taking me over the hills and through the woods, big fields with grazing cows and horses passing by, old barns degraded by time and weather slowly slipping into piles of rotten wood, broken down tractors sitting in driveways that led right to the road. The road curved and dipped and then took me back up the mountain, elevation climbing, until my ears popped, and oak trees turned into pines. Soon it would all be gone, behind me, patches of green and brown seen from the air, stretches of grey asphalt curling between. It was one of those moments, as I was driving, where I felt I was seeing the moment play out as if it were some pivotal scene in a music video, the moment where decisions were made and there was no turning back now.

Overstaying my welcome after the date was a symptom of the anxiety I was feeling about leaving America. I wasn’t just leaving a familiar past, but the familiar options for my future. These were the boys I’d most likely date, these were the girls I would work with, these were the places and activities we would engage in. There was nothing wrong with them in particular, and maybe that was part of the problem. I never felt as if they were mine, until, that is, I gave them up when I boarded the plane. I was grieving for the familiar and for the fact that the familiar hadn’t given me anything to stay behind for.

Naturally that grief was accompanied by anxiety concerning every number of things. I was twenty-two, had broken up with my boyfriend, and moved out of our shared house to spend the year after graduation living at home with my parents and helping my mother take care of her Alzheimer's stricken mother. I had a degree in English Literature and no idea where I wanted to go in terms of a career. Signing up for an MFA in creative writing was a way to postpone having to make any long-term decisions; for two more years I could call myself a student.

Picking a program in London was harder to explain. For one it sounded cool. I would at least be doing something a little more interesting than all those people who'd managed to sign up for law school before final semester senior year. I had been to London before, I spoke the language (I could have gone to France and had to learn French and that would have likely killed me), and there would be plenty of culture to dig into if I needed something to occupy my friendless time before I crawled home. (Anxiety causes my thoughts to come with 'just in case' clauses.)

Mainly, it scared me. I knew I could do it—move to London and go to school there—because I had lived away from home for four years and leaving for college had scared me too. But I wanted to be the person who did something big like that, moving abroad, even if it was only for a year. The person I was at the end of my two-year relationship was not the person I wanted to be. That girl was browbeaten, always interrupted, never right, sad, and sullen. Even in the midst of that relationship, travel had been a time when I could let my guard down and not give so much of a damn what other people thought. I could simply choose to pay more attention to my surroundings. Maybe if I went abroad and stayed abroad, I could make that person permanent.

I'd grown up with stories of family who managed to, as Mom called it, 'get out'; whether she meant 'get out from the back woods,' or 'get out from under familial expectations,' it was a toss-up, there were plenty of both. Dad reading *Rebecca* in a rented chair in Hyde Park or toiling away building a railroad in Australia; Mom crossing the Atlantic to reclaim herself after divorce and depression; Grandma P leaving Denmark, great-great-great-something Mary Jane and her family looking for a fresh start in America after bankruptcy in England. These stories always captivated me. I wonder why they, not their siblings (or not all their siblings), were the ones to leave. Was their leaving the beginning of a search for more or the end result of a failure to flourish? Why me, the middle child of three, the only girl, why am I the only one that couldn't progress smoothly through the traditional rites of passage? Why did I obsess over stories of generational anomalies that removed and replanted themselves in new lands while my brothers played college tennis, found girlfriends, and proposed? Maybe some place else, I wouldn't be so obvious as I stood still on the side lines. Maybe I'd be able to join in without stiff self-consciousness.

* * *

Felicia and I started hanging out almost every day after eating together at *Ha Ha*, spending most of our time in her dorm room in Kingston. She had a looseness about her personality that instantly made me feel less self-conscious, as though I knew she wasn't judging me. Her looseness, however, was contrasted with an iron steak of self-confidence. She appeared low maintenance—with basic jeans, beat up sneakers and baby doll t-shirts covered with a hoodie—but wasn't afraid to show her personality—she had a tattoo on each ankle, a bellybutton ring often visible due to the baby doll t-shirt and never went anywhere without a novel and a notebook in her bag. In her dorm, she pulled the duvet

over her unmade bed for me to sit on and then sat heavily in the desk chair and opened her laptop.

Stepping over empty potato chip packets and piles of clothes, I sat on the end of the bed and leaned against the wall. There were two windows that looked out across a parking lot to a slice of the Thames, and both with windowsills large enough to sit on. A small dresser was at the end of the bed, some of its drawers not closed because of all the clothes stuffed into them. The closet had one door open and instead of hanging all the clothes were all neatly folded along the bottom.

“Why haven’t you hung up your clothes?” I asked

“No hangers,” she said. She pulled open a bag of prawn cocktail potato chips.

“They aren’t exactly expensive,” I said.

“Eh, not too bothered.”

“Is that your boyfriend?” I asked, pointing to a framed picture on the desk. It was a portrait; most likely taken at a mall, of a balding man with circles under his eyes and a weak smile.

“That’s Doug,” she said.

“And these?” I asked. There were three other frames sitting on the ledge that ran alongside her bed along with a couple old glasses of water.

“That’s me and my sister, and then those are my parents with my stepparents.” Her sister appeared to be much older than she was, and each parent had his or her own frame.

I learned a lot about Felicia in the year and a half that we would spend together in Kingston, and a lot more as we kept in touch over the years. There were so many things about our backgrounds that should, or easily could, have separated us, but somehow none of it mattered. Details just helped us fill in our images of each other, but by the time we

learned anything real or factual about each other we had already decided to be friends and the rest would just add colour. Not that I resent my background, but it felt as if hers gave her something to say. I hadn't worked out what mine had taught me, which was part of why I was in London.

Felicia learned from adversity, within, as well as from outside, her family. My family was a tightly sealed and isolated unit. It was us against a world we chose to ignore. Felicia was what she calls a 'Band-Aid baby', made with the hopes that she would repair a dissolving marriage. Her sister is some eleven years her senior. Felicia was a sick child, however, with kidney problems that kept her in and out of the hospital. She was smaller than the other kids her age and read far more books than she spent time playing outside.

Her parents divorced before she was ten. They both remarried, introducing stepsiblings as well as stepparents to the mix. Her mother re-found God and didn't appreciate her precocious child's probing questions and blossoming liberal beliefs. My parents didn't plan on having children; it was part of their pre-marital agreement not to. At the time, about a year after their marriage, they were attending a local church where the pastor kept preaching about family. Both my parents had strained or difficult relationships with their families; my mother's mother told her that Catholics don't get divorced, and that was before my mother's first divorce. I'm guessing words were said before her second as well. My dad had moved away from home—after a boarding school education—after university and never looked back; he wasn't the type to enjoy wearing a coat and tails to another debutant ball. And then his parents had died, ten years before he met my mother. For some reason the sermons on family had an impact on my parents and, despite my mother's geriatric status at the age of thirty-two, they easily conceived and birthed three healthy babies. We never even broke a bone between the three of us.

Felicia went to school and was bullied for being small and nerdy. The other children taunted her, “You think you’re better than us because you’re going to college?” My brothers and I were home schooled from the time I was seven until I was seventeen, all the way through high school. My brothers bullied me, and I bullied them in return. We were shielded from the kids my Dad feared we would meet in public school bathrooms, kids with drugs and pressure in their words. There was never a question or a doubt that we would attend college.

I thought I had moved past peer pressure because I’d been raised to listen to others and then, essentially, ignore them and do ‘the right thing’ or what I wanted to do rather than what I was being pressured to do. And in a way I did learn that ultimately other people’s opinions are just that: their opinions, and that I should not worry too much about what they think, because I will be the one who has to take responsibility for my actions in the end. But I also grew up getting most of my knowledge filtered through my father’s—granted vast knowledge—opinionated explanations.

Felicia, on the other hand, was bombarded by other people’s voices, and had to learn early to silence the chatter and discover her own opinions. I asked questions, received an answer and was generally satisfied. Felicia asked questions and received so many answers that she learned to use those answers as starting blocks for the research into what would be her answers.

Felicia had to work, alongside finishing her senior year of undergraduate work, to save up to come to London. I told my parents I’d finally figured out something I wanted to do next, after almost seven months at home, without a job, after graduation.

She never made me feel bad about it. “I wouldn’t have guessed you were home schooled,” she said when I told her. “You don’t act, or look necessarily, like you have

money. I can tell because I know you that you don't worry about it, but you don't go around like an asshole." My parents kept a low profile, had no need for fancy cars or flashy anything. The craziest thing they did—aside from home schooling three kids—was making us all live on a boat for two years when we were little. Felicia might occasionally say things, in group conversations, about trust fund kids—said with a slight sneer—then remember and look at me apologetically.

I grew up being pulled along as my parents did things, gave us things to do. Felicia grew up surviving hospitals and carving a place, a path that was all her own. It was a trait that had attracted me to my ex, Neil, the sense that he had fought for his place, his interests, and his personality. I wanted to know how he did it, and I suppose I wanted to know how Felicia had done it. The difference between them was that Felicia didn't resent my background or make me feel as though I had done her a personal disservice or that I owed her something.

"This is that playlist I was telling you about," Felicia said, turning to her computer, unplugging her headphones and plugging in her speakers. "The one I listen to when I'm working on my book." She launched into the plot of the fantasy novel she was writing, and her enthusiasm dripped from her lips. She talked in detail about her plot, about the moments she wasn't sure of or the terminology she had decided on. The fact that she had such a plan brewing, as well as the fact that she had hours of music to play as she wrote, boggled me. I had a vague idea of writing about my year off, writing about my mother dealing with her mother's Alzheimer's, but I had none of the certainty Felicia possessed. I barely listened to music, and would probably be far too distracted by it, but Felicia thrived on activity, on a pulse that was not her own. She could read a book in a day and read faster when the television was on. And she retained information. I might take a week to read the

same book, sitting in a quiet room, and not remember half of it. It was obvious that books were an escape from the real world that was her constant, while I read to fill the time while I waited for something to happen.

As she talked, I pulled my legs up under me and started rearranging the lumps on the bed. There were clothes poking out from under the duvet and I pulled them out piece by piece folding each one and setting it aside.

Felicia paused. "What are you doing?"

"Um...folding," I said. "Is that weird? Is that like way invasive and personal?"

"You don't have to stop," she laughed. "I guess it is kind of personal, but I don't mind. Just know you don't have to do that."

"Sorry, I think I organize as a way to self-soothe, a sort of anxiety thing," I said. Cleaning gave me a sense of control, at least of the space around me, when everything else felt so far beyond my grasp.

"Is my room giving you anxiety?" she said with a smile.

"Actually no, it's more the fact you have a book and sequels planned out and I barely know where to start. And forming a plan for your room is apparently where I chose to start."

"What's your plan?" Felicia asked, watching me fold her clothes.

"I'm buying you hangers for Christmas." I would also buy her a toaster, so she wouldn't have to fry her bread in a frying pan anymore. I still have the toaster seven years later.

"You really don't have to," she said.

"We've been here for weeks and it looks like you're treating this place as a hotel," I said. "I still can't believe you're only here for the MA by the way. You should really consider

staying for the second year and get the full MFA with me.” We hadn’t known each other for very long, but I couldn’t imagine the day she would leave.

“I already wish I could,” Felicia said, a small frown on her face.

“It’s getting late,” I said. “I should probably go.” I put the stack of folded clothes on the short dresser at the end of the bed. I didn’t want to leave, but I didn’t want to put the walk home off too late or be childish and ask to stay the night.

“How long is the walk to yours?”

“Half an hour,” I said. “Fifteen to the school, fifteen from the school.”

“Text me when you get back, let me know you made it,” she said. It was a mom thing to say, but it made me feel as if someone cared whether I made it back.

Walking through Kingston in the daylight produced many contrary emotions. The town itself was picturesque, with the old stone bridge reaching across the Thames, the riverside full of restaurants, and the ancient market place adorned by a gold statue of Queen Anne. The sheer number of people always surprised me, made me aware of how much time Americans—at least suburban ones—spent in cars, separate from other people. Walking through the masses, trying to look up at the Tudor buildings and into the market stalls without being run down by a buggy, it all reminded me how far away I was from home and made me wonder how long it would take before the incredible stimulation of staring around would wane into normalcy and each foray into town wouldn’t feel like such a loaded task.

At night the feeling was doubled. I did not normally go out at night, either at home or when traveling abroad. I tended to think like my father: when five o’clock hits it is time to get home and have a drink and call it a day. The first night I went out with the girls from my dorm in college, we all spent hours getting ready after dinner, doing our hair and picking out

clothes and taking pictures to post online. “So, when do we leave,” I asked. “Around ten-thirty,” my friend said. “But it’s only eight-thirty now,” I moaned. I had to take a power nap and multiple shots to make it out the door.

In America no one walked; everything was too far apart to walk. Walking was a sign one didn’t have or couldn’t afford a car; walking was a vacation thing, not a transportation thing. I walked to class my first two years of college, because I lived in the dorms on campus and I didn’t like the pressure and responsibility of driving. I was also worried about the freshman fifteen (the average amount of weight gained by incoming students during their first year of university). When the guy I was dating found out I had a car he said, “Why didn’t you tell me? We could have been having real dates, going out and doing things.” It hadn’t occurred to me to tell him, since he lived nearby, within walking distance. To him, a car meant ‘real’ dating, as if what we had been doing wasn’t real. A car meant that he would no longer have to feel bad about only walking me halfway home—because he was only semi-concerned for my safety and more concerned with the fact that he would have to walk all that way back. A car meant safety; that he wouldn’t have to be responsible for my safety.

When I first toured the University of South Carolina, one of the things pointed out around campus were the security points: tall boxy electronics pillars equipped with red sirens, a call button and a speaker. The guide told me and my mother that these boxes were sprinkled liberally around campus and could be used to reach campus police in the event of an emergency. He’d also heard that it was possible to simply press the call button and keep walking, pressing the call buttons on the security posts as one continued to walk, so that security would know where one was, as a precaution. Walking at night carried inherent risks, ones that were not necessarily questioned, and risks that seemed unnecessary with so many cars around.

Walking alone at night, while always ratcheting up the awareness level, also raised the adrenaline and made me feel braver by virtue of the fact that I was walking with my head up and my shoulders back, but it didn't stop my eyes from flashing back and forth in the search for predators. Walking home from Felicia's was an exercise in being responsible for myself. I was proving to myself I was capable of the responsibility, the same way I eventually had to prove I was capable of the responsibility of driving in the States.

* * *

Christian was flying in from Hamburg for a conference. I planned to meet him at his hotel on Goodge Street Friday afternoon.

Christian was the only person I saw after I broke up with Neil and left our home in Columbia (the capital of South Carolina, home to the University of South Carolina, and my home for 5 years). After I left Columbia, it was as if the city and everything in it no longer belonged to me. I left, I abandoned my home there—paid off the remainder of my rent, took my belongings and left—I didn't feel entitled to keep anything. I'd essentially cut myself off—or allowed myself to be cut off—from all my previous friendships and I didn't want the people who took Neil's side at his immediate insistence. Christian was the only person—much to Neil's annoyance—the only continuing memory of the good times I'd had at school, even if all the memories associated with him weren't the best. We'd come close to being together, flirted with the idea, but the timing had never worked out. One of us always became impatient and moved on just before the other found themselves free. When I moved to London he was living in Hamburg, Germany. I was still willing to forgive and

forget in the hope that maybe all our flirting and sexual tension would actually lead somewhere, that not all of my life from Columbia would be lost.

We'd met on my first day of my second year of university. The lobby of the dorm was swarming with students lined up in front of folding tables or dragging bags and pillows toward the elevators. Checking in at the folding tables I was greeted by an enthusiastic young man.

"You're in room 1101. Hey, that's my floor! I'm in 1104! You're one of mine," he said.

"One of your...?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm Christian, I'm your Resident Advisor, so if you need anything, I'll be just down the hall."

"Exciting," I said. From that moment it was five years of not quite on and definitely off.

"Look, I'm you're RA, I wouldn't really feel right," he said one-week post kissing me after watching a Brad Pitt movie at the student centre.

"You never called, and I got a boyfriend," I said at the beginning of my third year after we'd spent the entire summer calling each other long distance.

"Are you still with your boyfriend," he asked at the beginning of my fourth year, after I'd deleted his number per my boyfriend's request.

"This is the boyfriend, do not call here ever again," my boyfriend said into the phone after he took the phone from me and pressed redial.

"I broke up with my boyfriend," I wrote in an email months after leaving Columbia.

"I'm actually living in Germany," he wrote back.

"I was thinking about moving to London," I wrote.

“You aren’t moving to London for me, are you?” He asked over Skype months later.

“No, actually I’m moving to London for myself,” I replied into the computer.

“Good. Because I met someone,” he said.

“Of course, you did.”

“Yea, it didn’t work out,” he emailed just before I left home.

“When are you coming to visit?”

The hotel lobby on Goodge Street was small, with only a little plush bench in the front window to sit on and wait. And wait. And wait.

“Are you sure you are at the right hotel?” the man behind the desk asked.

“I believe I am, I’m sure he’s just running a little late.” I’d been flushed when I came through the lobby doors, finding that I could not walk slowly to save my life or the underarms of my sweater, and I was worried my face was still red.

“Of course,” the man said, looking at me with a pity tilt to his head before he started shuffling his papers again.

Christian finally arrived, pushing through the doors and striding straight to the check in desk, not sparing a glance for the rest of the room. The idea was to never be too excited to see one another. The clerk looked at me sideways, as I tried not to show too many teeth. I stood and approached the counter and only when he finished interacting with the clerk did Christian turn and smile at me.

“Hi,” he said.

“Only a little late.”

“I underestimated how long it would take me to get here from Heathrow.”

“Obviously.”

“Shall we?”

I tried not to look for the clerk's expression. Sad little girl in her purple sweater and red face, waiting on a boy.

It rained that night. Christian took the umbrella from me as we stepped onto the street and I laced my arm through his as we huddled beneath it. "Makes me think of that Rihanna song," he said, and he started singing it as we trudged through puddles in an effort to dodge the people. My sneakers were soaked through in no time.

"What's your favourite part so far?" Christian asked, sweeping his arm out into the rain and gesturing at the city around us.

"Not driving!" I laughed. "But seriously, I love the walking. And my feet are finally healing from all the blisters I got my first week."

We walked through puddles, dodging other umbrellas and fighting for our space on the sidewalk. The streets were crowded with pedestrians despite the rain, though all the bus stops were mobbed, buses pulling up with windows fogged over and people only visible as black shapes packed inside. We crossed the river, the tourist boats practically empty, a few stalwart sightseers wearing ponchos and peeking out from under the brims of umbrellas. We slipped into the Tate Modern to dry off. I was like an ADD gerbil flitting from painting to painting, marvelling at the real-life canvases that I'd seen so many times in print or on screens. Christian strolled behind, his coat over his arm, with a slight smile on his face.

"How do you know all these names?" He asked when I'd pointed out another Pollock.

"I grew up with most of them. My Dad liked art. We always had art courses and art books. There was a book big enough to kill a small child on the table by the front door. Some of them stuck with me for some reason or another."

“Guess I didn’t have the same exposure,” he said.

“And I never ballroom danced, so we all have our interests.”

“You’ve certainly done things in your life haven’t you?”

“I had parents that did things with us, there is a difference.”

“Still. You know things.”

“Don’t know a thing about business.”

“I can take care of that part. You can buy the art.”

“I’ll make our walls rival Gertrude Stein’s salon!”

We left the gallery and walked beneath the black canopy of umbrellas across the Millennium Bridge and followed Fleet Street back toward the Strand.

“I really want to see Tra-Fla-gar Square,” he said, mispronouncing the name.

“You mean Trafalgar Square?” I said.

“Yes, and please do correct me, I don’t want to sound like an idiot.”

“Then you might want to stop pronouncing the ‘th’ on Thames.” That was something my ex would not have done, ask me for my knowledge or expertise, let alone ask to be openly corrected. Christian had a way of putting me in touch with my privilege in a way that made it feel like a good thing, something I didn’t have to feel bad about.

We stood at the concrete balustrades and looked down on the fountains and the people passing beneath Nelson’s Column, children climbing on the lions despite the slippery marble.

“My friend, Felicia,” I said, “She calls this the centre of the world.”

“Why?”

“Technically, I suppose it’s because you can see Big Ben, the London Eye, and just down that way is Buckingham Palace. And the way we came is the way to the City. But

really, it's the feeling of standing here, thinking about how damn old this place is, that it used to be the centre of an empire, and the fact that we're here. It's a little spine tingly."

"A little spine tingly?"

"Don't you feel that way about Germany?"

"I suppose you're right. Finding a place that feels like a part of something."

"Didn't really get that feeling in Columbia, did you?"

"Not that football games and tailgates aren't fun."

"But there's nothing like feeling the pulse of two thousand years rushing around you and making you feel small for a completely different reason." Columbia, the university, made me feel small because there were so many people like me, so many students flowing back and forth across campus and it felt as if I could stand still in the middle of it all and never be touched. In Trafalgar, in London, even in the Kingston market place, there were so many people that were so unlike me, had lives that had nothing to do with me, that would never have anything to do with me, and despite being alone in the midst of it all, I didn't feel as if I was being left behind. I felt like I was being swept away, swept up into something far bigger, something that would take me somewhere, rather than leaving me behind. Two thousand years of history and I would be part of the epic flow that would gradually wear away and leave a mark, but I would not be expected to make a mark all on my own. Whereas standing in the centre of Columbia, at the heart of campus, made me feel as if I should be getting swept away, was being asked to make a mark, with no idea how.

I'd washed my tights and socks in the sink and hung them over the radiator to dry that night, our damp shoes sitting beneath. As I pulled them over my legs in the morning, Christian came into the room, his shirt for the day hanging crisply on a hanger.

"I had to go two floors down to find the ironing room," he said.

"It's a whole room?"

"A whole room dedicated to ironing."

"How exotic."

"Might ask for a different hotel next time," he mused as he hung the shirt in the closet and started to unbutton the one he was wearing.

"And when might that be?" I asked.

"I'm not sure yet," he said. "I'll let you know when I know. But in the meantime..."

"You mean when you're not here?"

"Yea, I don't want to tie you down or anything," he said.

"I've only just gotten here, really," I said.

"Exactly, and I don't want you to feel like you can't have fun, or you're..."

"Pining for your return?" I asked.

"You know what I mean."

"I will have fun, you don't have to worry. And I told you. I didn't move here for you."

"I'm still glad you did."

Slipping my shoes on, I held out my hand for my jacket. He pulled it from the closet and helped me slide it on.

"And with that, I'll leave you to your business. Until next time," I said, giving him a quick kiss before slipping out the door.

As I took the steps down into the Underground, I wondered at the continuous state of 'almost' that our relationship seemed to dwell in. Nothing had happened that night; we'd shared the bed, made out and spooned but I was still too hesitant to give in, because it felt as if every time we'd come close to trying to be a couple, something had come between us. I

didn't want to have sex with him if we weren't planning on going anywhere with the relationship. I'm a bit of a prude when it comes to sex, and I'd rather be the one that got away than just another one. There were plenty of moments when the timing seemed almost right and I wondered if being in London, and not in Columbia, would make any difference?

* * *

A month later Christian invited me to visit him in Hamburg. It was my twenty-third birthday and it happened to fall over reading week—the American equivalent school holiday being called fall break.

“We have to go somewhere,” Felicia said as we sat in the postgrad computer room in the library. Despite the weather slowly turning colder and the nights creeping into the afternoons, I still found myself wiping sweat from my forehead whenever I entered a school building.

“Would you be willing to go visit Christian in Hamburg?”

“I've never been to Germany so count me in.” She pulled up a map on the computer in front of her, found Hamburg, and then zoomed out to view the surrounding cities.

“Would it be silly to go via the ferry to Amsterdam?”

“Only if we go and don't smoke.”

“I'll book the tickets.”

“I'll start looking for a place to stay.”

I had only ever travelled with my family or just me and Mom. So, it was a basic student holiday, yes, but that was also what made it important. I hadn't had much experience with

basic school anything. I'd taken one road trip with friends in college that involved driving to Pennsylvania, but that was it, no crazy trips to the beach for Spring Break or anything like that. I hadn't had many opportunities to travel with just my friends (hadn't had friends that I would have travelled with). It felt like one of those adolescent coming of age things I hadn't fully experienced. I was dreading the adult side of it—logistics—but I was, anxiously, looking forward to having some plain old fun. I didn't want the parts of the trip I was responsible for—which was most of it—to be the downfall.

Planning this trip with Felicia made me think about Mom planning out our elaborate six-week vacations that included flights in and out of multiple countries. I had not participated in the planning of our trips beyond helping Mom pick our destinations and the tours we wanted to take. I went along for the ride. I think there are two images of me in my parents' minds. One is of a capable academic, someone who loves to travel, who keeps a clean home, and is a people pleaser. The other is an anxious, depressed teenager who hasn't grown up and who prefers to ignore burning adult concerns such as financial planning, health care, and booking her own plane tickets whenever possible. I believe they have this split image because I tend to cycle back and forth between the faces I show them, based completely on my stress level.

This trip was a test.

Could I merge the two images, engage the quiet, logical academic in the service of something that would alleviate the depressed teenage soul while not letting anxiety run amok? Could those two images be compatible? Could I take on the responsibility of the logistics and still have a loose and carefree time? Keep track of everything and let go of it all at the same time? Could I be my mother and myself?

These were all things I did not think about before the trip. Before the trip, the questions ran more along the lines of: Will Felicia still like me after this? Is the accommodation I pick going to be shit? Is going to Hamburg to see Christian the right way to spend my time, will it be boring for Felicia? Will she be disappointed? She would be collateral damage if this experiment went south and the trip ended up a dud. It was a risk, going on a week-long trip with someone I had only known for two months. We could end up fighting and never speaking again.

So many things could have gone wrong. So many things did go wrong.

The ferry to Holland left at eleven at night, which gave us the entire day to wander around London before catching the train from Liverpool Street to the docks. Camden Market was the go-to destination for those who hadn't learned enough to find the other weird and wonderful neighbourhoods and markets the city had to offer; so, we went there. I'd been to Camden almost ten years before, with my family, because my Dad wanted to return to the site that had been the hip place to go when he'd been to London as a young man. The day with my family and the day with Felicia could have been the same: crowded with people like me and Felicia, parents and children staring around at the few mohawks, the pierced faces and leather clothes. Felicia and I were indistinguishable from the tourists following their guidebooks, looking for the places that once gave the city its colour and flavour.

The market was buzzing with people and voices, vendors shouting for attention, smells and colours assaulting the sense; every few stalls there were arms held out over cases of food waving samples of chicken on toothpicks. Eventually we visited Camden enough that the labyrinth of the market revealed itself and it became clear that all the vendors sold the same food and goods, just scattered at different intervals throughout.

That day, carrying tinfoil bowls of fried rice and sweet and sour chicken, our backpacks on our backs, Felicia found a picnic table next to a donut vendor. We sat silently, eating with our eyes as much as our mouths. The permanent stores, with real windows and doors, were packed with steampunk trench coats and corset dresses made of tartan with full skirts. The jewellery stalls all had open shutters with long brass necklaces hanging from hooks, owls and clock faces and charms clicking against each other. An image was for sale, an image of cool, of disregard, of hopeful dissidence hung on every rack, repeated again and again, just to prove that the image could be worn by anyone with the cash to purchase it. Felicia could have blended into the market crowd, could have worn a Mohawk or stood behind a stall and sold belly button rings, convinced buyers that the image she was selling was within their reach. She walked as though no one had the right to question her presence. I essentially followed her around that day. She had her black backpack on her shoulders and seemed the image of a young traveller, compact and obviously in charge and moving with a purpose. I felt slightly off, not quite on the mark, with my nylon duffle bag on one arm, trailing and trying not to lose sight of her in the crowd. People unconsciously moved out of her way as she walked, and all I could hope was that it was clear I was with her. I was, and often still am, the one to move for other people when they walked without noticing I was in the way. I wanted, possibly through being friends with Felicia and certainly while living abroad, to find a way to get in sync with her—in the sense that I wanted to be the image of something and not feel like the off-brand version of something. I was trying to get that process rolling by offering to help plan the trip, by going on the trip at all—continuing the never-ending attempt to expand my comfort zone.

Amsterdam Central Station, aside from the overabundance of extra consonants, was slightly faceless on the inside; there were signs in Dutch and English indicating platforms and exits, but the tiles were bland dirty beige and the benches and rows of chairs appeared worn and flagging. On the outside it was awash with red brick and gold trimmings along black, spired roofs. The buildings gave off a rose-coloured hue from the red bricks, warm and cosy compared to central London's sharp steel lines and white marble. Two clock towers flanked the entrance of the station and kept time over the flow of bodies and click of bicycle wheels crowding the small cobbled square. A canal sat like a moat around the square, the station a bastion for transportation. Taxis lined up on one side, boats moored along both banks, and a huge parking structure dedicated its three levels to bicycles—a sea of handlebars, baskets, wheels, and seats, all blending together into what would make a killer 1,000-piece puzzle. There were bikes in London, but nothing like Amsterdam's tidal traffic of two wheeled machines careening along the roads, outnumbering cars three to one.

Mom and I had been to Amsterdam five years before. Dad had suggested we start there before going on to meet our first ever tour group in Italy. He also suggested, with some glee, the idea that we should smoke while we were there. "That would be cool." Who was I to say no, when my own father was suggesting I go and do such a thing? He, apparently, hadn't said no when offered the delicacies of other cultures during his travels. It surprised me then that he would suggest such a thing, but he was already in his sixties at the time, and had lived a life full of weird and exotic experiences and I believe that he wanted all his children not to be afraid to try new things; though I don't know if he ever suggested my brothers try smoking, less likely as they were athletes and had something to

lose. Maybe he thought I needed a jolt to get outside my comfort zone—but while staying within the law.

Leaving the train station with Mom, I'd been nervous. The city had the reputation for being cool, simply put. Or maybe I thought that only people who were cool would smoke pot, or go to Europe, or smoke pot in Europe. At that point in my life, having been home schooled for ten years, anyone who left the house every day was cool to me. I still wasn't sure who I was when I wasn't inside the four walls of my parents' house. Going to Europe felt like a great time to experiment with who I would be out in the world. Mom and Dad never told me who I was, who I should be; by virtue of telling me to go to Amsterdam and smoke pot, Dad was giving me permission to try things out for myself. And I had Mom as a safety net, someone who'd been through things, who had a stable sense of herself and would stand beside me as I attempted to work out my own.

Stepping out of that same train station with Felicia felt similar, in that there was a strangely innate sense of trust in the person standing next to me, except this time I was expected to already have a more stable sense of self, to know something about the city I'd already been to.

Canals reached out and away from the station, slicing through the city, creating lanes of bright autumn trees, branches reaching out to each other from opposite banks, dropping yellow and red leaves to float on the black water. Up above, the sky was bright blue with streaks of wispy white, the clear air making colour stand out everywhere amongst the backdrop of ornate buildings snuggled and huddled together, their quiet shuttered eyes keeping watch. Street level was alive and buzzing like the forest floor. We became two of the myriad pedestrians among countless bikes and the occasional car fighting for space on the sidewalks, paths, and streets.

Orienting ourselves was the first step. Normally, I was good with maps, and had a solid sense of direction, and expected to feel sure of myself in Amsterdam, but the street names were so long, and the canals seemed to drag my sense of direction out of my hands, as if the lines on the maps had started to wiggle and reform on their own. For some reason, learning to navigate London had come easily. Once I'd established how to get from Waterloo train station to Covent Garden—passing half the major tourist landmarks along the way—I felt so accomplished, as if I'd gone beyond being a tourist because people were now stopping me and asking me for directions, and I was capable of supplying them.

Walking became a sport, dodging bikes and other people and attempting to decipher street names that felt like a private joke played on tourists. The flat letting agency I'd found online revealed itself after much study and comparison of the map to the brick walls bearing nothing but consonants. I nervously pushed open the door, aware that this was the first accommodation I'd ever booked for myself. I didn't want to disappoint Felicia, or my mother, or myself.

Inside was empty—as though it were under construction—and I was sure it was the wrong place until I heard a voice call up from a staircase on our right. Downstairs there was only a small wooden table with a computer on it and nothing else. The big bay window at the front that looked directly at a concrete wall let in the light from the street above but had nothing but bare floors to shine on. A petite woman stood behind the desk but didn't speak.

"Hello," I said. "I have a reservation, booked online." I handed her a print out of the confirmation.

"The room will not be ready until a few hours," she said curtly. "You may leave bags here, pick them up when you come to get key. There is a very good market in this neighbourhood, not far away. Give me your map, I will show you."

We ordered breakfast in the café across the street, sitting in the window. “She seemed pleasant,” I said.

“No shit. Not the best attitude for working in hospitality.”

“I get that we’re tourists, but I was sensing a little bit of animosity in there. So, are we going to that market?”

“Fuck that bitch, let’s find a coffee house,” Felicia said.

Felicia led us back through the neighbourhood towards one of the larger canals until she found a coffee shop we’d passed on the way in. It was set low into the street, as though it had sunk and settled in for the long lazy haul with a mug of steaming coffee in one hand and a joint smoking in the other. Looking through the little curtained windows, the air inside was blue with ribbons of silky smoke and dark walls with low wooden furniture. It was a combination of Picasso’s blue period and Van Gogh’s swirls.

A white man, practically hidden by dark dreads hanging over his face and shoulders, sat on a stool behind a high counter. He looked us up and down, resettling himself on his stool, as though remembering he was required to look alive. “Where you guys from?” he asked.

“I’m from Kentucky, she’s from Carolina,” Felicia said. Not many people knew Carolina, let alone North or South.

“Regular hay smokers then, huh?” he laughed. He pulled out a book, or a menu, and started showing Felicia the different types on offer. I don’t know if she understood everything he said—I didn’t—but she stood there and smelled the samples and shook her head yes and no and made every appearance of knowing exactly what she was doing. She took her purchase and a few loose papers from a jar on the counter and we moved into the coffee shop to find a seat.

Felicia plopped down on a couch against the right wall and I sat with her, able to look out at the rest of the shop. Off in the far-right hand corner were two men slouched over a small table, their clothes the same brown as the walls, their beards scraggly and their hats pulled down over their eyes. They seemed as if they would be more comfortable amongst coal miners in a Victorian pub. The rest of the place was empty, tree trunk stools tucked under low tables. After two attempts at rolling a joint, Felicia stopped and ripped the paper in half before stating again. "I don't normally use papers this long," she said.

I was self-conscious sitting on that couch. I'd smoked before—aside from the first time with my mother. I'd smoked plenty in college with my ex, but I'd always felt a bit strange passing a joint around in public. Being a blonde with big boobs I feel it's easy to be stereotyped, and I didn't think I looked like a smoker, I looked like I didn't belong and feeling eyes from the far corner as I attempted to hide my giggles—I use the word 'giggles' specifically because it has the connotations of little, teenage girl as well as of embarrassment—was not helping.

"Let's go before they kick us out for not being able to handle our shit," I said.

We were quiet, serene and buzzing, as we bopped down the cobblestones, heads twisting on necks every which way. At the street that led back to the letting agents, Felicia broke the silence. She stopped and looked up at the sign high up on the red brick wall. It read Blauwburgwal Centrum. "I'm going to call this Blue Burger Wall Street," she declared.

"Sounds like you're hooked on phonics," I said.

The proprietor allowed us to gather up our bags and then led us to the freshly cleaned little apartment just below street level with a "canal view"—looking up and out from the front window gave one a good view of the bottom and back of a wooden bench, and the railings for the canal just beyond.

“Did you go to the market?” The sharp little lady asked. She looked me up and down again as she handed over the keys.

“No, we haven’t made it there just yet,” I said. Were my eyes bloodshot? Could she tell?

“Well, you should go. Do you want any other directions?”

“Could you tell us how to get to the Hard Rock Café?” I asked.

“The Hard Rock Café?” she asked. “You come all the way to Amsterdam and go to the Hard Rock Café?”

“They’re giving away free drinks if you come wearing a Halloween costume,” Felicia said. “We were going to stop by there on the way to another pub.” She gave the name of some place that used to be a cathedral, and that seemed to suit the woman’s tastes more and she bent over to point it out on our map, grudgingly marking the Hard Rock as well. Then the woman looked up, straight at me, and said again, “I can’t believe you’re going there.” She shook her head. I wanted to justify myself, to say something, or just to tell her to shut the fuck up and butt out. But I kept my mouth shut so the lump in my throat wouldn’t escape and embarrass me further. She left.

The next day we continued to trace the path my mother and I had walked years before, going not only to the Hard Rock and the Anne Frank House, but also the Van Gogh museum. Inside the Van Gogh galleries we stopped speaking and allowed the space to grow between us as we went from painting to painting alone. I thought of my mother standing there with me years before. The irises reminded me of her garden. I’d never travelled without her, but I’d felt her presence constantly, as though she were standing just behind and to the right of me wherever I went. Hers wasn’t a judgmental presence, but a reassuring one. She’d been there for as long as I could remember, a friend and protector, though

maybe had she not been so protective—thrown me into the deep end against my will once in a while—I wouldn't be so homesick for her. She observed with me, made me feel not so alone on the outside, though I envied her ability to be on the inside wherever she went.

My two brothers and I had been home schooled for ten years, through high school. Dad was the teacher and Mom was pretty much everything else. Where Dad's knee-jerk reaction was "No," Mom was capable of getting him to come around. Not that she was a push over; she just had a much longer fuse. When I had no friends, I always had my mother. When I was depressed as a teenager, she took me to the doctor for antidepressants. "I've been there," she said. "And you know what I say, better living through chemistry." I never asked her to leave the room during appointments because there was never anything to hide. She'd heard it all before. Our trips abroad were essentially behaviour therapy. The first group tour we took I said to her, "I'm going to be an extrovert, because no one here knows any different and I won't have to see them ever again when it's over if I don't want to." So, I was an extrovert. And I had an incredible time. I felt free and uncensored. There was no prior knowledge to hold me back. My mother's prior knowledge of me didn't count because it felt more as if I was being the person my mother and family knew behind closed doors—the irreverent, sarcastic, intelligent, funny and self-deprecating person—rather than pretending to be someone I wasn't and ending up being nothing but quiet. The experiment was to show that part of myself from the start, not taking seventeen years to develop a relationship of trust and support first. Every trip, every new tour group, was practice being someone else, or another side of myself. She let me lead us through cities and museum and has the photos of me taken from behind to prove it.

Felicia and I left the museum and wandered the streets, threading up and down the canal banks, crossing back and forth over bridges, until the sun set. The buildings seemed to

crouch next to the banks of the canals, huddling together in their tight terraced rows, their facades peeking up above their roofs. Something about the way the houses were nestled, and seemed to go no higher than six floors, the way the water glistened, gave the city the feeling of a blanket slung around one's shoulders, meant to keep you warm in the dead of winter; the eyes stay low and look up from under the brim of a hat before being pulled back to the canals and the red brick. London had a way of soaring upwards, and with new high rises built every year the impression grows, even Buckingham Palace has a lightness about it that drags the eyes upward.

"So, we going to do this?" Felicia asked as we came upon what appeared to be a closet sized newsstand.

"If you're in, I'm in," I said. She entered the newsagent, walls lined with potato chips, cookies, and candy, lighters and paraphernalia, posters and post cards. Behind the counter sat a woman on a high stool. She was heavy set and gave off the air of living under a bridge and waiting for Billy goats to pass.

"There are different strengths, but you can split one between you, if you don't want too much," she said. She used her fingernails more than her fingers to pull down a little box from the shelf behind her. "Eat sugar," she said, "to come down, when you're ready."

Back in the flat we pulled blankets from the beds out to the couch and turned on the television for background noise. Felicia opened the box.

"They look like rabbit turds that fell out of an airplane," I said. The mushrooms were small, unnaturally blue pellets.

"Cheers," said Felicia as she popped a small handful in her mouth.

"What are they like?" I asked.

"Kind of juicy, like jelly beans," she said.

I put one in my mouth. It was sour and had a dense spongy texture. It squirted when punctured and made me gag.

“That’s disgusting! I’m going to have to eat something just to get them down.”

“Is it weird that I like the taste?” Felicia asked.

“Yes, it is weird,” I said watching her nibble on them one by one. I grabbed a block of cheese we’d purchased at a market stall and cut off a chunk. Twenty minutes later, Felicia had finished her portion and I was struggling with the cheddar.

“I think I’m starting to feel something,” Felicia said.

“Me too, but I don’t think this is right.” I stood up slowly and rewrapped the remaining cheese before putting it back in the mini-fridge. Then I went to the bathroom to pray to the porcelain goddess, as my father would say. My stomach turned inside out, and the bowl turned orange and blue, as if I’d recreated the sky from *Starry Night* in my toilet.

“I think I’m fucked,” Felicia said when I came back out and sat on the couch next to her.

“And I’m not,” I said. “Give me some of that blanket.”

“The pattern is starting to look like Pac Man, and I can’t tell if it’s just me, or if it really looks like that.”

“It kind of really looks like Pac Man, I don’t think it’s hit you yet.”

Two Guys, a Girl, and a Pizza Place was on TV in English. Every fifteen minutes Dutch commercials would scream from the speakers, breaking the illusion that we were in any hotel in America. An hour later Felicia spoke.

“I think I broke something,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Like in my brain. I think I broke something,” she said, “by doing this.”

“The mushrooms? No, you’re just tripping, you will come down, trust me.”

“But it feels like it will never end, and it can’t ever go back,” she said.

I looked back at the TV as the *Furturama* theme song began to play. It had been Neil’s favourite show. I’d tripped with him my first time. It was like being in a dream the way I suddenly knew things. I felt the essential difference, the fact that no matter how close I may get to someone, I will be the only one to experience my life. That night with Neil, the only thing that was real was the room we were in, the two cats following us around. Everything outside the door, all the other relationships, the things that made up my life, had no meaning. It was as though everything I had ever been, fell away and somehow, I was still left. I’ve always considered my identity to be a relational one, to the point where it has occasionally overwhelmed me. I have a dependent streak. (I thought of the depression I felt as a result of tying myself to Neil; of the ups and downs I felt during the will-they-won’t-they with Christian.) That night, tripping with a cat on my chest in my boyfriend’s one-bedroom apartment, it was as if nothing—other than the cat—was connecting me to anything. I knew Felicia would come down from that feeling, but she could be right; she could have broken something, something may have shifted. I found a box of sugar cubes in the kitchen cabinet and handed them to her. I watched as she ate them one by one staring at the TV. She felt very far away, and I wished I could have been high with her, if only so the distance would be breached.

Looking back on that moment, I was sad, of course, not to be experiencing the full effect of the high with her, but I was also scared. Even though I didn’t know it then, didn’t make the connection, I was afraid that like my stories of tripping with Neil, this too would become just a story, and Felicia just some girl who happened to be there. I had begun

mythologizing my relationship with Neil in my writing for classes, and I think I was worried that Felicia would turn out to be a fleeting influence on my world.

The next day, sober, we left Amsterdam for Hamburg. It was dark, and hours past our predicted arrival time, due to unforeseen delays caused by a suicide on the tracks. Stuck on trains and platforms, I'd spent the day trying to decipher Christian's lyrical Facebook statuses since he wasn't responding to my messages. In the hostel I threw my bag on the bed and crashed onto Felicia's bottom bunk.

"It's bad enough that he had to move, and didn't have a place for us to stay," I said, "but he better not blow me off."

"He can't blow you off," Felicia said. She pulled out a contact lens case and a toothbrush from her bag. "It's your birthday and you're coming to his town."

"I don't have good birthdays," I said.

"You're not seeing him until tomorrow anyway, so calm down."

The morning arrived, along with my monthly flow and a season's worth of rainfall that would last all day and well into the night. It was my twenty-third birthday. "Just got my period," Felicia said as we left the hotel.

"We are so in sync," I said.

Felicia had booked a walking tour of the city and, attempting to ignore the dark waterline creeping higher and higher up our denim-clad legs, we pulled our scarfs up over our heads and set off. Standing under the old cathedral, wiping raindrops from my face, I was slyly happy with the coincidence of the bad weather. I hated my birthday, it never lived

up to the pressure I felt to make it great. I could be moody on birthdays, and the rain and my period were great excuses for not feeling festive.

Christian strolled up through the rain as the tour ended near the waterside and our little band dispersed. After a perfunctory hug, I introduced him to Felicia.

“I was going to take you guys on a harbour tour, but it doesn’t look like it would do much good today,” he said. We all three turned our heads to look out towards the harbour which was banked in with fog. “Should we start with a coffee and just warm up?”

“Absolutely,” Felicia said. “I think my shoe has a hole in it from walking in all this rain.”

“Aren’t those the ones you just bought?”

“Specifically for this trip, yes.”

At the nearest coffee shop, we left Christian to order and went to the bathroom.

“And now I could really use a joint,” I said.

“I know I said I wouldn’t smoke after those mushrooms, but I’d smoke one with you,” she said, looking at her teeth in the mirror.

“I just wish this day were going better. I hate that I dragged you here to be third wheel on a shit show.”

“At least I got to see another city, it’s cool.”

“Today might just call for a second anti-anxiety pill,” I said.

“We could always snort it,” Felicia shrugged.

“Why the fuck not. Better living through chemistry.” I was feeling slightly destructive. The day wasn’t progressing the way I had hoped, I wasn’t feeling the same attentions from Christian as I had hope, and the flutter in my stomach was fluttering away. At least the pills were prescribed as needed, though snorting it was purely to do something

stupid. I dug the pills from my purse and Felicia took out the hostel key card. She broke one pill in half and then proceeded to crush it on the edge of a folded-up baby-changing table. I rolled up a bill and we took turns. My nostrils went a little numb but there were no real effects. I wanted to believe I could achieve some distance between myself and the person wearing my soaking wet jeans. Maybe then I could distance myself from her disappointment.

Christian was sitting next to a radiator with three large steaming mugs on the table in front of him.

“So, was there anything in particular you wanted to do today?” he asked.

“I read about a Beatles’ museum that sounded pretty cool,” Felicia said.

“It is! I went there probably my first week,” he said. “Actually, there is a Beatles’ pub crawl we could do tonight too, if you’re interested.”

“Sounds like a good way to see a little night life,” I said.

“Why don’t I take you to the museum, then I can meet you afterwards, we can go to dinner and then do the pub crawl?” he said.

I looked at Felicia, who shrugged.

“Sure, sounds good,” I said.

“Great,” he said. “You’ll love the museum, it’s a lot of fun.”

Christian led us through the rain, and we parted in front of the museum as the sun went down. Inside were multiple rooms filled with memorabilia from multiple decades: the suits from Sargent Pepper’s, letters written from and to the band, art work from the albums, as well as music stations with giant headphones. The museum would close not a year later.

When we re-emerged, it was dark, and the streets were teeming with people where they’d been sparse not long before. A sculpture dedicated to the English band dominated

the sidewalk. Each member was outlined in one continuous, thick, flat, curving strip of brushed metal. Four outlined men, holding flat metal instruments, lights embedded in the street shinning up from below. We waited in the rain, among the metal musicians, for Christian who appeared out of the dark coated crowd and led us to an Italian restaurant down the street. My heart sank a bit when the waiter said they were out of tiramisu.

“That’s a birthday for you,” I said.

“I’m sorry, babe,” Felicia said.

“How old are you today?” Christian asked.

“Twenty-three.”

“Well no one likes you when you’re twenty-three,” he said, quoting a Blink-182 song.

“So, let’s go drink,” Felicia said.

Back on the main drag the rain had slowed to a drizzle. The pub-crawl was supposed to meet next to the metal band sculpture. No one seemed to be waiting there except us. Christian went in search of information after half an hour.

“They said it doesn’t run on Thursday,” he said when he returned.

“And of course, it’s Thursday!” I said.

“The hostel had a bar,” Felicia said.

“To the hostel,” I said. I was strangely relieved. If things weren’t working out, I couldn’t be expected to be very happy or enthusiastic.

The bar was inside the hostel, across from reception. It had a rectangular counter on the back wall with a smattering of tables and chairs set up around a foosball table. Christian came back with a tray of shots.

“It was buy-one-get-one-free,” he said.

“Finally,” Felicia said.

“Happy birthday to me,” I said, raising one of the shots in the air and throwing it back. My shoes were wet, my jeans were still damp to the knee, my hair was frizzing out. “Fuck it,” I said. “Hand me another one.”

A few hours later we stumbled back into the shared room and Christian followed me into the top bunk. I’d always heard—from the girls in the university dorm in South Carolina, to my ex, to my new friends in England—that birthday sex is the best. Being on my period gave me the excuse to keep my clothes on, but part of me felt some pressure—the same pressure I’d felt to enjoy the day at all? The pressure to make this trip feel like some crazy student romp through Europe? —to engage in that ritual. Maybe it was the idea of checking off ‘fooled around in a hostel’ off some imaginary list, but either way he ended up getting more out of the night than I did.

Felicia and I caught an early morning train to the airport, leaving Christian asleep in the hostel. The clouds were slowly clearing and the fog burning off.

“Not sure that was the best introduction to Germany,” Felicia said leaning her head against the window.

“I know it was kind of a disaster,” I said. “I’m just glad we’ll be home soon.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” she said. “Then I thought, how weird is it, to call London home?”

“Guess we had to leave it to realize how settled we’ve already become.”

Then the journey to the Lubeck airport took a turn. (Lubeck was the smaller, local airport, compared to the larger Hamburg Airport closer to the town centre.) After arriving at a small suburban train station, we were meant to take a bus on to our destination. Not understanding the bus system, we missed our stop because we didn’t press the ‘stop’

button. After the driver yelled at me in German when I asked about the airport, we promptly disembarked at the next stop. Which was in the middle of nowhere, in front of a gated community. The guard in the gatehouse pointed down the road when Felicia asked for directions and we set out to walk the mile and a half back to the airport.

“We’ve clearly missed the flight,” I said, “we’re almost an hour late.”

“There’s got to be another one,” she said. “We’ll just go in and buy new tickets if we have to.”

Finally, the large, low-slung building appeared. It looked grey and empty, the concrete apron around it cracked and growing green. A single plane sat silent a few hundred yards from any possible gate. “It looks like the place planes go to die,” Felicia said.

The building itself was empty. The hallways were quiet, the rent-a-car kiosks abandoned, no music playing; simply still air.

“Why does this place have such a post-apocalyptic feel?” Felicia asked.

“I could plant a whole bunch of shit in this place and no one would even know,” I said. My voice was getting loud. I wanted someone to hear me but there was no one around. Frustration was causing a build-up of energy and I had nowhere to direct it.

Approaching a main counter, I called out. A few minutes later a short fat woman, clearly German, eating a chicken sandwich came around the divider to stand behind the counter.

“Hi,” I said. I was doing my best to keep my voice polite. “Are there any other flights to London today?”

“Only other flights today,” she said around a mouthful of chicken and bread, “are to Sweden and Iceland later tonight.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “I guess we’ll be going. Can you tell us how to get back to the train station?”

“Bus is right outside.” She lifted a heavy arm and pointed a limp finger towards a window.

There was a bench on the side of the road tucked inside a plexiglass structure, a tall pole with a sign on top stuck crooked into the ground next to it.

“Well we’ve just toured rural Germany,” I said, dropping my bag on the sidewalk.

“This trip took a serious turn somewhere,” Felicia said. She put her backpack down, sat on the small bench and leaned against the plexiglass structure.

“I believe that was when we tried to leave Amsterdam.” I started pacing.

“I think it was when we took those mushrooms. And we just lost two plane tickets,” she said.

“We just have to get to a real airport this time,” I said. “And I threw up those mushrooms.”

“My point exactly. I just hope we can get a cheap flight,” she said. “Stop pacing. Just sit down.”

“My parents would never let me fly home without you,” I said. I sat down next to her and pulled my bag close.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” she said.

“I’m not leaving you in fucking Hamburg,” I said.

“Thank Christ,” she said, “Because this place sucks.”

A bus, two trains, and multiple phone calls later and Felicia and I were sitting in the Hamburg airport with two tickets for the next flight to London with only eight hours to kill until take off. We camped out next to a power outlet to charge our phones.

“They aren’t all this bad,” Felicia said. “I mean none of my other trips have been like this.”

“I’d hope not,” I said. “But I guess we’re special.” My purse had a strip of dried leather that had started to peel away from the handle; I fiddled with it, peeled it more.

“I’m just really sorry your first trip without your mom was such a bust,” she said.

“It does suck. I wish I hadn’t bothered to see Christian as it just all felt so half-hearted. I’ve been semi-attached to this person for years but I’m just not sure what I actually want from him. But, anyway, I don’t hate you after all this, so that’s a plus.”

“That’s true,” she said. “Our problems have only been logistical, so it could have been a lot worse. I’ve had some obnoxious traveling companions.” She pulled out her notebook and a pen and flipped to a clean page.

“It felt a lot like traveling with my mom,” I said. “At least we’re in the shit together. I like having someone to share it with, the good and the bad.” I played with the strip of leather, having pulled it free from my purse strap, and watched Felicia start to write.

On the train from Waterloo Station back to Kingston, Felicia and I sat across from each other, our bags on the empty seats next to us.

“Funny,” Felicia said as she looked out the window, “that all day we have been saying, ‘I can’t wait to get home.’”

“And we meant Kingston?” I said.

“Yea. And funny that it has started to feel that way.”

“Funny how we kept saying pounds instead of dollars when we were really trying to say euros.”

At Kingston Station we hugged and parted ways and I began the thirty-minute walk back to the dorm in Surbiton. Essentially, it had been an experiment, like the trip to Italy had been with Mom. Then, I was working on extroversion, this time I worked on independence. Parts of the experiment were a success: given enough time, I could eventually figure out logistics and mostly make it places on time. I was pleased Felicia wasn't holding Hamburg against me. I was delighted our friendship had passed the test of prolonged time spent together while traveling (aka under duress). I was disappointed, however. I put out for Christian on my birthday. I let my desire to achieve the 'typical young person's trip abroad' get the best of me. I wanted to be capable of staying out all night, getting drunk and being fun, doing drugs and not freaking out, having birthday sex.

I thought I'd taken my sex life into my own hands but hadn't totally grasped the concept that not doing anything was also taking control of one's sex life. I could say I went to Hamburg because I wanted to see Christian, when really it was about wanting to be seen. I liked the idea I had, the image of me I hoped he held: of an international traveller, cultured and learned and full of interesting stories and opinions. For some reason, seeing myself (my past, my upbringing, my current life as a graduate student in London) through his eyes put a glow on the whole picture, a glow that was lacking when I examined the image I carried of myself. I hadn't found a way to see that glow without looking through him, and if I let him drift out of my life that glow would go with him.

I was basically embarrassed. And embarrassed that I was embarrassed. I don't know when the joke was made but, Felicia asked a friend who had just been on a date if the friend had had sex. The friend replied that she was on her period.

"You've got a mouth," Felicia said.

It was the *Sex and the City* response, cavalier but serious at the same time.

I wanted to feel normal, I wanted to want to do those things but felt stupid, small, lame when I did them. I could not wear those actions proudly because I felt like it wasn't actually waving a feminist flag high, it was letting my individual needs be usurped by an outside ideal of how I should go about enjoying sex. Whoever or whatever we have sex for should serve our own needs. I was serving the idea of casual encounters when I am not a casual person.

I never felt pressure from Felicia or my friends, and Christian asked nothing of me, I just wanted to do things and not have their meaning hanging over me. I wanted to act and not think about it later, but as much as people may be capable of change, I was not capable of keeping the analysis at bay. In the end, I strung the meaning up myself.

It was an experiment, trying on a different personality, and it didn't work. I knew it didn't work because I was disappointed. I just pee when I'm drunk, I don't feel comfortable being out late at night, I threw up the mushrooms, and I fooled around with a guy who liked me when it was convenient. It still took me a few more mistakes before I figured out for sure that I wasn't that girl.

But I had found someone who didn't judge me for trying to figure it out.

* * *

The rest of November was spent living out of garbage bags. My three flat mates had complained of bedbugs. While I hadn't seen or felt them in my room, Housing was spraying the flat and instructions dictated personal belonging be sealed in plastic bags until the infestation was deemed cleared, which would take up to three months. Even suitcases were to be bagged. The new plastic hangers, empty, rattled against each other whenever the

closet door was pulled open to retrieve the garbage bags sitting in the bottom. Searching through dark caves for underwear and socks, I prayed I wasn't inviting the bugs to live on my skin just because I'd opened a bag long enough to dress. My skin itched, though I never found an actual bite mark.

Housing refused to relocate any of us. The rooms were technically habitable and there were still students yet to be housed in the third month of term. I was stuck with black plastic for the foreseeable future.

Until I was assaulted.

It happened the week after Felicia and I returned from Hamburg, after a night out with a new friend. At this point, my expatriation was going well. I had made one good friend, I was happy with my classes, and had moved passed my initial period of homesickness (finding Felicia helped distract me tremendously from any previous feelings of loneliness). After the assault, and the resulting housing change, my social life expanded—Felicia and I became a part of a group and lived closer to the heart of Kingston—and I felt as though suddenly, I really had a life.

Felicia met Krissy in one of her classes and Krissy invited us for drinks in central London.

"I think you'll like her," Felicia said. "She's blonde, and from New York, and did some kind of politics and peacekeeping in college."

"And what about that makes you think I'll like her?" I asked. I would end up living with this girl for five years.

"Because she said peacekeeping was boring, so she quit," Felicia said.

As it turned out, Kristen—who couldn't get people to stop calling her Krissy—was politically inclined, but more interested in trash-magazines and celebrity gossip and wrote non-fiction about how bizarre it was to do a semester abroad in Romania (so boring that the main form of entertainment was drinking twenty-four/seven and eating raw sausage). She straightened her hair and wore heels almost exclusively.

"I don't wear colour because my sister told me no one would take me seriously if I wore pink. When you have big boobs and blonde hair you're already at a disadvantage, people just think you're a bimbo."

That night we sat in a pub on the edge of Chinatown and revelled over the ease with which we might find ourselves in the centre of such a city.

"I do love the tube, and I find it easier to navigate than the buses, but I love looking out the window of a double decker red bus," I said.

"People here need to learn how to walk though," Felicia said. "I mean serious, walking five abreast is not acceptable." This particular gripe was one that we would all return to again and again.

"It's the gas theory," Krissy said. "Like a gas, people will fill the entire open space, no matter what. They can't help it."

"Maybe it's because we all learn to drive so young," I speculated. "The basic concept of slower traffic keep right is kind of burned into you. As well as checking your blind spots and not stopping in the middle of the fucking road." Later, my speculation would turn to wondering if our inability to navigate crowded sidewalks was because we all came from the suburbs and never had much use for sidewalks as we never walked anywhere. Maybe the people we thought were unashamedly hogging the sidewalk were, in fact, practicing better sidewalk confidence than us.

"It's especially bad with the youths," Felicia said.

"Kids are always afraid of being left out of the conversation," I said.

"Damn, I hate the youths," Krissy said.

"And there are no signs here about loitering, have you noticed that?" I asked. "Are we the only country that loiters?"

"It's because all the kids get bus passes so young," Felicia said. "It means they can go places and don't have to wait around to get picked up."

"I can't imagine putting my child on a bus and just letting him go at like eight years old," I said.

"Kids still ride school buses in America," Felicia said.

"I was home schooled," I said.

"What happened to getting your mom to drive you to the shopping mall to meet your friends?" Krissy asked.

"We had to drive forty-five minutes to our mall," I said. "And that was the close one that closed down, so then we had to go an hour and fifteen."

"The Mall is where everyone has their first job or their first car accident," Krissy said. "It's a rite of passage." Felicia and I just looked at her, drinks half way to our lips and heads cocked to the side.

"Just me then?" Krissy said.

"You got in a car accident in the mall parking lot?" Felicia said.

"Minor fender bender after leaving the ice cream shop, where I was the manager, thank you very much," Krissy said, flipping her hair.

"Before I got here and was properly confronted with the large groups of youths, packs of teenagers wandering around, I still thought I was eighteen," I said. From there the

talk turned to the students at the university, how not only were there so many young faces but they were so diverse. Every skin tone imaginable was represented.

“This one Asian girl, she’s nice, but super clingy,” Krissy said. “She asked me out for drinks, ordered a really expensive bottle of wine and then said she didn’t have her wallet. Now she won’t quit texting me.”

“Is that the one from our class?” Felicia asked. “The one with the fantasy story that’s essentially a Disney rip-off?”

“That’s the one,” Krissy said.

“Felicia read that one to me,” I said. “She sounds like fun.”

“And the only hot guy in our class, Hot Paul,” Krissy said, “yea he quit coming after two weeks.” Classes were small to begin with, which is preferable when the expectation is to have quality time with professors, but not preferable when attempting to meet new people. Our classes were skewed towards “mature students”, which technically included anyone over the age of twenty-two, but in the case of the creative writing class half the students were forty-five and older. Most were part-time; attending one class a week while holding down full-time jobs and/or kids at home. I can only assume it is the same in American graduate classes, it was more that it was so different than being surrounded by thirty eighteen-year olds fresh out of high school. Of the other half, students closer to our age, most of those were from countries other than the UK, and a fair number of us were from America. Our dorms were similarly isolated, with my entire flat being fifty percent American and fifty percent Asian. Felicia didn’t have a single Brit in her flat either. There had been a few get-togethers at a pub down the street from the school after classes, with lots of people showing up the first few times, and then the numbers started to dwindle as the

prices of the drinks and burgers went up, as children called wondering when mom was going to be home, as nights became shorter and new pubs were found elsewhere.

Only Krissy lived with, let alone knew, proper English people. She had met the boys she lived with when they had studied abroad at her university in New York. They had invited her to live with them when they found out she was coming to London. (Her sister, who lived in LA, had asked why she would choose to live in Putney and not Shoreditch, the latest hipster paradise. “Because I can afford the rent and it’s closer to my school.”)

“When are we going to meet these boys?” Felicia asked.

“We’ll set up something soon, I think you guys will like them, they’re not rapey at all,” Krissy said. Though she didn’t mind living with boys, she did mind the split bathroom—the toilet being in its own closet—because, “there’s no way to pretend you aren’t pooping!”

“I bet they cleaned up when they were in America,” I said.

“Of course, they did!” Felicia said.

“All they had to do was speak and they could have had their pick,” Krissy said.

“Do you guys hear it the same way, the accent,” I asked. “Now that we’ve been here a while, does it still sound the same?”

“Not quite,” Krissy said. “But obviously we were exposed to more Colin Firth and Hugh Grant than anything else.”

On the train ride home, Felicia and I talked about meeting Krissy’s boys. There were the obvious hopes and expectations that they would be as cute and as nice as Krissy had said, and though Felicia had a boyfriend at home, she would not let that stop her from enjoying the hunt. I was apprehensive. I’d had more than one friend find boys more interesting than the maintenance of our friendship. And the boys always found that friend more attractive than me—for the same reasons I wanted her to be my friend, pure

confidence and nerve. I wanted to meet and mingle with the locals, but I wanted to be sure I wouldn't lose my footing in the process.

When the night was over, I stopped at Felicia's dorm, changed my shoes and collected the bag and umbrella I'd left earlier and headed off through town. The high street, the shopping street, was deserted and the only people out were in front of one of the large dance clubs, *The Hippodrome*. A handful of people were milling about the front door, smoking cigarettes, and one guy was peeing against a wall down the street. Like me, one or two people walked briskly on the other side of the street. I approached the main campus, the buildings quiet and dark for the night, a few cars left in the small faculty parking lot. I took a left and skirted around the campus grounds, through the neighbourhood that bordered it, and found the main road behind campus that I knew would take me up the hill towards my dorms. Just as campus fell behind me, a young man passed me, stepping sideways into the grass to do so, swaying slightly. His hair was slicked back, black and shiny under the streetlamps and I liked his black and white checked jacket. I slowed down and allowed the distance between us to grow, the tension easing slightly as he crossed the street up ahead. I could walk parallel for a few blocks as I worked my way up the hill.

He slowed down on the ascent. I sped up, knowing I needed to cross the street to take the next left. I crossed and took a left into a neighbourhood adjacent to the dorms. I felt him follow. I let the collapsible umbrella in my hand extend and straightened my dorm keys between my fingers. Minutes went by. Under a street lamp, where the hill evened out for a moment and the road curved, a fist came from the right. He'd sprung from just beyond the reach of the light and the force knocked me into a low wall that melded into the neighbouring hedge. I violently flung my arms and legs in the air to keep him at a distance while I regained my footing. I pushed against the wall and swung my umbrella, hitting him

across the shoulder and knocking his head. He stumbled back and lumbered down the hill. I shouted and cursed at his back, half hoping someone would emerge from one of the many houses I was stood in front of. No one did.

I looked down at my umbrella. It was bent in the middle. I pulled out my phone as I covered the last of the ground to the dorms.

“You make it home ok,” Felicia said on the other end of the phone.

“I was just assaulted,” I said.

“Seriously?”

“No shit. I was just punched by a Mexican.”

“Are you ok? Why do you say Mexican?”

“He just looked Mexican, I don’t know,” I said. “What do I do?” At the time I could not process my unconscious racism. When time had passed and I had had time to process the event, I realized my prejudice. Not only had I reverted to describing a person based on their race, but I hadn’t realized that I was choosing the race based on where I came from and what races were normally present in my world.

“You have to tell someone,” she said. “Go to the front desk and tell them what happened. Then call me back.”

In the front office I dropped my bag on the floor in front of the desk as a middle-aged man with a beer belly came out from the back room. He had no uniform on, and I wasn’t sure if he was security or just some guy who’d been hired to watch the mailboxes at night.

“Hi,” I said. “I was just assaulted. I thought I should tell someone, just in case.” My voice was surprisingly calm and nonchalant for the content of the words. I like how I handle

myself in emergency situations. Without time to agonize over decisions, I find I am quicker to action. Shock probably also kept my voice level.

His eyebrows shot up and his mouth fell open. He was definitely there to watch the mailboxes.

“Let me get you something cold,” he said, “for your eye.” He handed me a cold can of Fanta as he called the police and in no time two officers showed up. They asked their questions and I answered them.

“Now, just so you know,” the female officer said (she looked just like Peggy from *Mad Men*), “nothing will most likely come of this. We probably won’t be able to catch him or persecute anyone.”

“I understand. I just didn’t want it to go unreported,” I said. “In case it happened to someone else.”

In my room, I called Felicia. “I’m going to have to tell my parents about this,” I said.

“Are you going to call them now?”

“I’ll wait until tomorrow. It’s not an emergency. I am actually ok. I just don’t want them to see my face and start panicking.”

“I mean it’s exactly what my mom would have expected to happen,” Felicia said.

“And they have every right to freak out, I am thousands of miles away and they can’t do anything about it. I just have to convince them I’m ok.”

The next day, Felicia went with me to the housing office. The same man who’d turned me down for a room change based on bed bugs started the process of relocating me when he saw the bruises forming around my eye. Felicia had had a flat mate leave the week before, return to California, leaving a room in her shared dorm open. I made the argument

that being in town meant I could walk to and from campus with people I knew, past a multitude of cameras—none of which had been present to catch my encounter—and would, in effect, feel safer.

Before I packed, I called home.

“Before I start,” I said to my mother through the computer screen, “I just want you to know I’m ok.”

“What happened?”

“I got assaulted walking home last night.”

“But you’re ok?”

“I beat him off with my umbrella.” Dad walked into the frame.

“What happened?” he asked.

“She was attacked walking home, but she hit him with her umbrella,” Mom repeated.

“That’s my girl,” he said. “So, what’s going on?”

“Do you need me to come over?” Mom asked.

“No, I don’t need you to come over,” I said. “I’ve already talked to housing, and I hope to move into Felicia’s building. In the meantime, she said I could stay with her.”

“Tell her we said thank you,” Mom said.

“So, you’re ok?” Dad asked.

“I mean, my face hurts a bit, and I think I’m still in a bit of shock. But I don’t want you guys to think I can’t handle this, just because something bad happened.”

“As long as you say you’re ok,” Dad said.

“And I’m so glad you have Felicia,” Mom said. “Tell her to hug you for me.”

Felicia shared her single bed with me for a week, until I was officially able to move into the room next door. I wasn't surprised when Mom told me that the first thing my older brother, Joseph, asked when he heard about my assault was to question when Mom would be flying out to see me. His surprise at my not needing my mother's immediate physical presence was valid, as I was his childish little sister. But the physical immediacy of this incident had already taken place, in the assault itself. I did not need someone to hold my hand, per se, because I had fought back. My immediate physical need had been met; I had met it. The times I had called my mother and asked or expected her to drop whatever she was doing and physically come to my side, had been emotional. I'd ended a relationship or was having trouble dealing with my obnoxious friends at university. I still hadn't figured out how to fight my way out of the emotional situations, but this incident, the assault, proved to me that, at the very least, I had internalized my father's words— "Kick, scratch, leave a mark and do not go gently." But I also didn't want her to come because I didn't want my time abroad to be tainted by having my mother swoop in and save me. That was why I moved to London in the first place, to try and learn how to save myself.

* * *

Attending class with a black eye garnered a few looks.

"What the hell happened?" Krissy asked.

"Got punched walking home after Chinatown," I said.

"Jesus Christ," she said. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "They say one in four women get assaulted in their lifetime. Can't help but feel a little relieved. No offense."

"Glad I can take the hit, so to speak."

“Anyway,” Krissy said, “you guys should come out to Putney and have drinks at mine and then we can go out with my flat mates. “

At the end of the week, we kicked off our shoes and curled up on Krissy’s couch with glasses of wine, when the boys appeared. They stood in the doorway to the living room, surveying us without a word. They were like Goldilocks’ bears: three versions that became progressively larger and slightly more grotesque. Upon entering the first pub the boys turned towards each other creating a tightknit circle, our presence promptly forgotten. At which time a young Paul McCartney started talking to Felicia. They traded insult for insult and when he went to the bar to refresh our drinks Felicia turned to me. “He’s Australian and I’m keeping him.”

Australian Paul followed Felicia as we followed the boys to a nearby basement club called The Roxy. Once inside, the boys set off to talk to a tall blonde by the bar and Felicia and Paul drifted into a dark corner by the stairs. The music was so loud I could feel the bass in my chest. Krissy and I clutched our Jack and Cokes and plunged into the middle of the dance floor, Krissy flailing her arms and tossing her hair as if she were already hammered. I tried to spot Felicia but couldn’t see her. I followed Krissy as she pulled herself up onto a little platform, afraid of losing her in the crowd. A short bald man began grinding on my back and I felt my eyebrows shoot into my hairline. Krissy gave the man the once over, grabbed my hand and pulled me away but he followed. Turning a corner, I saw Felicia leaning against a wall making out with Paul. When I tapped her on the shoulder, she looked around to see the bald man shimmying against me.

She stepped around Paul and said into the bald man’s face, “Fuck off, she doesn’t want to dance with you.” She took a sip of my drink and turned to find Paul. Later, I wondered to myself, *you can fight off an attacker, but you can’t tell this guy to leave you*

alone? Krissy pulled me back to the dance floor. Out of nowhere the littlest of Goldilocks' three bears worked his way through the crowd to dance with us. Before the end of the night he reached up and kissed me, his friends laughing and high-fiving in the background. I wondered if it had been a dare.

On the street, without the music and the heat, the sexes separated again, and we followed the boys to the bus stop.

"I've officially been wearing these boots for twelve hours," I said.

"I'll switch shoes with you," Krissy said. "Maybe that'll give your feet a break." We exchanged shoes as we waited for the bus to arrive.

"Jesus Christ," Krissy shouted, "no wonder your feet hurt, these are awful. How is this possible, they don't look that bad?"

"I don't know but I'm never giving yours back," I said.

The night bus arrived, and it was empty. We filed up the stairs and into the front rows as it pulled away from the curb. Turning a corner, Piccadilly Circus came into view. The streets were deserted except for a custodian picking up litter but the lights coming from the collected screens reached out to the edges of the traffic circle making the whole scene appear captured in a dome, like a snow globe. The bus slipped quietly past, the sound of the boys' conversation dulling into the background as if a hush had fallen. Around the roundabout and it was all gone.

I found I'd been holding my breath as we'd gone through Piccadilly. It was an Oz moment—as in "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." Being out at night, surrounded by people I was legitimately associated with—people who had requested my presence as opposed to just tagging along with my brothers or my ex-boyfriend and his friends—made me feel as if I belonged in the picture I was seeing. I belonged with the party

that was still going on around me. And that fact alone was enough to make me feel as if I had been out of place, and somehow now I wasn't—let alone the fact that the scene was back dropped by London, by raging electric lights causing my eyes to dilate making me look as awake as I felt. The scenery should have been fake, as though appearing only on the windows of the bus, but I could hear the street sweeper's brush and feel the breeze coming through one small window and causing the air to swirl as we rounded the curve and put the lights behind us. The people were harder to pin down. I could understand, despite my drunken haze, that perhaps I had managed to find myself in London, but I was still unsure how I had managed to connect myself to the group of laughing faces around me.

Goldilocks' medium bear came up the aisle from behind and pulled Felicia out of her seat, sat down, and pulled her onto his lap. "You ladies staying the night?" he asked.

"Nope," said Felicia.

"Why aren't you staying?" he pouted. It was the most he'd spoken to us all night.

"The night's over babe," she said with a smile. "We're headed home." The bus pulled to a stop on a dark and empty road lined with hedgerows. This was their stop and where we'd need to change buses. Felicia stood up to follow Krissy and the others downstairs.

"I don't see why you'd want to do that," he said, standing to follow Felicia. As the others disappeared down the stairs, he turned, stepped towards me and kissed me. Then he turned back, started down the stairs. As I reached the pavement to see Krissy saying her goodbyes, he and the other boys were already heading down the street.

Felicia and I caught the next bus back to hers.

"He kissed me, just then on the bus," I said.

"When did he have time to do that?" she asked.

“I know I should be annoyed,” I said. “I mean, they hardly spoke to us all night, then his little friend kisses me, which is fine, but what, just because the little one did, he wanted to? Or just because the little one could, he wanted to?”

“I get what you’re saying,” she said.

“I don’t want to be a stereotype or something,” I said.

“Like the easy American,”

“Exactly.”

“But he was the hottest.”

“Yea, I’m not saying I’m actually upset.”

* * *

Christian put two pints on the table and slid into the booth next to me. The weather had turned colder, the nights arrived at four in the afternoon, Christmas lights were being strung up all over the city and he was back in London for another conference.

“I hoped for, and expected, a social life when I moved here,” I said. “I mean that was the point as I had nothing going on at home.”

“You just didn’t expect to get it as a result of getting punched,” he said.

“Would you have? Sure, the bruises have faded but the results are sticking. I now live with my new bestie, I like the other girls I live with, we’ve expanded our circle and despite the fact that I don’t think of myself as someone who ‘goes out’, I go out now.”

“But you went out plenty at USC,” he said. “I distinctly remember holding you upside down for a keg stand.”

“Yea the basic college stuff, like house parties and using a fake to get into a dumb bar. But that was just what you do. We were all at USC because that’s what you do, and that’s where we could all either afford to go, received scholarships for, whatever. Being here, being overseas, I don’t know, you have to want to be here. Going out here is choosing to be a part of the larger cultural experience, as opposed to be swallowed up by it because there is nothing else.”

“It certainly changes the type of people you’re likely to meet.”

“Right, because by virtue of being here, we have that much more in common than I may have had with the girls I lived with in South Carolina.”

“There were a few decent people there,” he said, “but I know what you mean. It’s not easier, but sort of more specific.”

“I know we’re technically still students, and a lot of it could just be freshman year feelings of change and new beginnings, but I’m hoping some of it will stick. That some of these beginnings won’t just be moments in time.”

“Maybe that’s the real test, then,” he said. “Not just getting here, but making it stick.”

“Maybe.”

There are things I don’t know how to say. They are uncomfortable because they are disappointing. For instance, Christian and I had sex for the first time that night, but only after I’d initially stopped him.

“Are you disappointed I said no?” I asked.

“A little,” he said. “He’s more disappointed than I am though.” He looked down at himself.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said. I changed my mind because it felt as though, if I didn’t, I would be missing some chance for things to actually work out, to go somewhere, because I was tired of feeling as though we were floating in limbo.

The sun was out but the air was crisp in St James’s park. Sitting on a bench I watched an old man, sitting on a bench to my right, toss a handful of breadcrumbs to an entire flock of birds that moved as a unit to gobble up the crumbs. A half-eaten *Subway* sandwich sat on the bench beside me and I was tempted to throw the entire thing into the old man’s flock.

I’d been locked out of the hotel room. Feeling hungry, and smug that I was able to dip out into the city for lunch, I’d left in search of food which I planned to eat before snuggling up with my homework and laptop back in Christian’s bed. With sandwich in hand, I’d swiped the key card only to be denied entrance.

I took my sandwich and walked out of the hotel and onto the street and walked until I ended up in the park. When Christian finally returned my call, he offered to call the hotel, or return and sort it out in person.

“Don’t bother,” I said. “You’re at your conference. I’ll manage.” I hung up the phone and stared at a moulting swan, his feathers dappled with left over brown that had yet to fall out. He was joined by second bird. Two moulting swans. They were almost more beautiful that way, in transition.

A mother walked by constantly turning around to check her child was still behind her, eating his ice cream cone. “It’s gonna drip on your coat again,” she said with an Irish accent. He threw the cone on the ground. “Oh no. All gone. It’s dirty. You’ll have to give it to

the birds.” She wiped his face with a napkin as he babbled against her hand. A pack of Spanish children ran past shouting, one little girl’s shiny purple boots catching the light.

I don’t know why I called him if I wasn’t going to let him do anything. I suppose I was just in the mood to passive-aggressively share my misery and embarrassment. I’d put out and then been put out.

Leaving the park through the Admiralty Arch I made my way into Trafalgar Square. I passed the lions and the fountains and climbed to the top of the stairs to sit on the balustrade with my feet dangling in the air. A man covered in silver paint wearing armour paraded around and allowed tourists to take photos with him if they tossed a coin in the hat on the ground. A little girl ran up to the wall near where I was sitting while her family consulted a map a little way off. She tried to jump up to sit on the wall like me but wasn’t big enough to pull herself up backwards. So, she turned around and jumped, pulling her right knee, covered in tights, up underneath her, then flipping around to sit down and kick her booted feet out in front of her, triumph on her face. I didn’t notice her leave. Then the rain started.

Should have gone home this morning, not tried to squeeze another day in. Quit while I was ahead. If I can say I was ahead.

As the rain worsened, I went back to the hotel and sat in the lobby, waiting. An hour later than he said he’d be, Christian walked through the double doors, talking on the telephone, and walked right passed me. I couldn’t seem to stand to follow. He saw me, just before he boarded the elevators.

“There you are,” he said coming over. “Really sorry about all this.”

“It’s fine. But I should get my bag,” I said. “You’ve got that dinner thing to get to.”

“Yea, I do,” he said. “Sorry I can’t stay and make it up to you.”

“Nothing to make up,” I said. It would be months before we’d see each other again.

* * *

There was snow on the ground the morning I flew home for Christmas break. Looking out from the back of the minicab, I watched Kingston slip away as we drove over the bridge. It was still dark, and the riverside was glowing under the streetlamps.

Heathrow was teeming with black coats and rolling suitcases. It had struck me that in the big cities the coats were always dark shades, or shades of grey wool, and when I arrived back at our local airport the jackets would be brighter colours, *North Face* and *Columbia* hiking brand jackets. Walking through any airport at Christmas, as I would soon find, required focus and a willingness to dodge. Since I’d moved to London, and since my blisters had turned into calluses, my pace had quickened, which came to great advantage running for my connection in Charlotte, North Carolina.

I always see my father first when I walk through the arrivals gate, ever since I started travelling with my mother. He’s bald and stands head and shoulders above the crowd, so there’s that. And ten feet in front of him, two feet shorter with her face pressed up against the glass partition, was my mother.

“I just got here,” I said, “don’t cry yet!”

“I’m just so happy you’re here,” Mom said.

“How was the flight?” Dad asked, taking my bag and turning towards the exit.

“Got an aisle seat, so I could go pee whenever I wanted,” I said. “New favourite seat.”

“Sound like a professional solo flyer,” Dad teased.

“The boys get here tomorrow,” Mom said. “And also, we moved you upstairs to our old room, did I tell you that, and we moved down into your old room.”

“When did you do that?”

“Only a month ago,” Mom said.

“Should have done it sooner,” Dad said. “Don’t need to be walking up all those stairs every day. Gettin’ old, you know.”

Dad got into the back seat of Mom’s Toyota Avalon, letting me sit up front where I’d have a clear view on the drive home. Leaving the airport is a sign that says, ‘Welcome to North Carolina.’ Seeing the rolling hills disappearing into the blue mountains in the distance, the road curving back and forth along the slopes of the land, I already felt surrounded by home. It was so different from the scene I’d left behind, taking the cab from Kingston to Heathrow, weaving through dense neighbourhoods, only to find myself ten hours later in land dense with trees instead of people, deep greens and browns instead of marble whites and red bricks.

Dropping my bag in my new room added to the sense of strangeness. I was home. I was not quite home. Had I left? I must have, if my room was no longer the same. My things were there, the bookshelves—though not the same—were doubled stacked with my books, the dresser—though not mine—was filled with my things.

“It’s alright, isn’t it,” Mom said coming into the room behind me. “We just don’t come up here anymore. Figured we could put your stuff up here, have it out of the way where we don’t have to think about it. Didn’t make much sense to move the actual furniture.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “It all still works where it is, you bought it to go there for a reason.”

I looked into the closet that fit under the eave of the house. "I do need to go through and get rid of some of this stuff."

"Well you do have a lot," she said. "But it's out of the way. We don't mind keeping it here for you. Your brothers only took their things when they bought houses, and even then, Andrew got rid of a lot of his." My younger brother had been ruthless, willing to toss old souvenirs we'd brought him from our trips abroad; Mom had kept them all anyway.

"Maybe I'll do a bit while I'm here," I said.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said, reaching out to hug me. "I'm glad you're having a great time, but I'm glad you're here."

"It's good to be back. I don't miss much in particular, just you guys."

"We miss you too, of course," Mom said as we walked back downstairs, "but Skype makes all the difference in the world." This was a phrase that would be repeated more than a hundred times in the two weeks I was home.

Dad was pulling vodka and tonic from the fridge to make Mom a drink.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked, looking at me. "I got you some wine."

"Wine would be great, thanks."

He pulled out a bottle of white then reached for a stemless wineglass from the cupboard.

"When I went to Samoa after college, I may have phoned home once...or twice," he said, pouring the wine and handing me the glass. "I probably wrote some letters too, but not many."

"How long were you gone?" I asked. We moved to sit in the living room under the high A-line ceiling. Beyond the double sliding glass doors, the night was drawing in, the outlines of the mountains fading, being replaced by small specks of light, houses dotting the

far hillsides. Inside, the plastic Christmas tree was standing in the corner by the fireplace, decorated and lit in multi-coloured twinkle lights. The Christmas before, Mom left the tree standing until August and only took it down for Andrew's wedding. After I left to go back to London, she left it up all year and I believe it has been standing ever since, though she does occasionally dust the ornaments.

"I was there for two years. Then I was in Australia for two years. That call was even harder to make with the time difference."

"What did your parents think of you not calling?" I asked.

"I don't know, I never asked them," he said. "But it was different then, we didn't have the same technology."

"And the expectation to hear from you more often," Mom added, "increases with the ability to get into contact."

Mom had a need to hear from me every few days. It probably wouldn't matter if I were living in the States, she would still expect to get a text or an email at the very least. Aside from typical motherly concern doubled by distance, her need also stemmed from the lack of communication between us while I was living in Columbia with Neil. She believed that if she had tried harder, pried more, she would have been able to detect my growing unhappiness before it became full blown depression. I had pulled away from her then and wasn't offering my feelings to anyone.

I met Neil at university; we started dating at the beginning of my third year. At the beginning of my fourth year, my final year, we moved in together. He had a clear vision of himself as a grungy photographer, sculptor, all around creative, who hadn't managed to get ahead because of all the people who'd held him back. He was confident and cool and interested in me. I wanted to be more like him; to have developed interests that I cared

enough about to tattoo them on my body, to have a personal style and the confidence to speak my opinions loud.

His confidence grew into, or became more clearly defined, as narcissism, and his hobbies took precedent and his opinions were louder. “People should know when they’re wrong. Shouldn’t let someone go around thinking they’re right if they’re not.”

While we were dating, I’d taken a few writing classes and written a few short stories. He never read anything I wrote—except my diaries just before we broke up. He never asked about my classes, my work, what I was reading or how I spent my time. It didn’t occur to me that my life was being belittled by being left out. I was in his life, but he wasn’t particularly interested in mine unless it directly benefited him. Standing in the garden of the University President’s house, sipping lemonade and sweet tea during a lunch for the students with the highest grade point averages—myself included—he started looking at his watch.

“You ready to go yet?” he said, finishing his glass of Coke.

“We’ve only been here twenty minutes,” I said, hoping my parents hadn’t heard him.

“The President already spoke, what more is there?”

“Alright, I guess we can go,” I said.

“We’ll come back next year,” he said, “when I graduate.”

As his identity took up a larger and larger part of my life it felt as though the only instincts I had were to revert to the role I’d played as a child: quiet peacekeeper who tries to anticipate the needs of others so as to appear useful and not an inconvenience. I became smaller and smaller, pulling back into myself. Not speaking to my Mother was a great way to avoid acknowledging how small I had made myself.

During our summer mother-daughter trip abroad, I broke down in Prague, stepped out of the shower and let my mother wrap me in a towel as I cried. Being away from Neil for

six weeks that summer gave me the space to understand just how lost in him I had become. Being back with my mother—who apologized for not being her usual nosy self when I wasn't calling home often enough for her liking—gave me the chance to feel cared for again, loved unconditionally, and heard. That trip was something he never would have been able to do with me—it was all my own and it reconnected me to the idea that I had things that were important to me and I was allowed to have them and put them first at times.

Two weeks after getting home, I broke up with Neil. (Writing about him and the breakdown of that relationship was a large part of my MFA dissertation at Kingston.) I felt small and weak, and the words slipped out of my mouth almost as though I had no strength to hold them in anymore. I left him, and my life in Columbia, and moved back home to Brevard with Mom and Dad. I'd let myself become isolated, and though I continued to feel somewhat isolated after moving back home, I felt protected rather than alone. The shelter given to me by my parents allowed me the time and space to regain my strength and confidence before I could try again.

Mom and Dad and I drove to the grocery store the next day, to prepare for my brothers' arrivals. Dad let me sit in the front seat again, the better to view the mountains as Mom wove her way through the woods, over the river and into town.

"In the time it took us to drive here," I said as we pulled into the grocery store parking lot, "we could have taken the train from Kingston to Waterloo and been in central London."

"Do you go a lot?" Dad asked from the back seat.

“We try to go every few weeks. Felicia and I went Christmas shopping at this huge Christmas fair in Hyde Park called Winter Wonderland just before we flew home.”

“Incredible that you can be there so quickly,” Mom said.

“Though strange that it takes twenty-five minutes to go ten miles,” I said. “And it didn’t take long for East London to feel far away. Especially when you are trying to get home on the night bus.”

“Did I tell you what Dad has started calling this place?” Mom asked, pointing to the grocery store, big red letters spelling out *Ingles* above the doorway. “Mingles. He keeps running into people, parents of kids you guys knew, or he knows all the baggers and checkout people, so he can never leave here without having a long catch up with someone.”

“Let’s hope we get out without being seen today,” I said.

“I’m going to go look at the steaks,” Dad said as we entered the store. He strolled off to the left while Mom procured a buggy and set off towards the vegetables.

“This place feels huge,” I said.

“Get me some lemons,” Mom said. “They did enlarge it a few years ago. Or was it last year?”

“I remember that, it just feels so much bigger now.”

“Gotten used to those itty-bitty corner shops?”

“We have a few big ones, but even still, the aisles are barely big enough for two little buggies and these things are double-wides. But even the food is smaller, with individual sizes and single pints of milk that look anorexic.”

“Of course, you have to carry everything home with you,” Mom said, picking out tomatoes. “I have a car.”

“Very true. If I had the trunk space, or the fridge space, I would make good use out of it. Especially if I had to then drive it half an hour home.”

“Your Dad does most of the shopping these days, actually,” Mom said. “He needs to go do something, go into town, at least once a day. Which gives me at least an hour alone to get something done.”

“Like pressure washing the deck?” I joked.

“I love my pressure washer,” Mom said. “I left a little spot near where we sit so you can see what it looked like before. I’ve only been able to do it the one time, since I’m still going down to Nanny’s every four weeks.”

“How is Nanny?” I asked.

“The same if anything. Still trying to pick the flowers off the rug. One day she was sitting in a chair in the living room and kept picking at one particular flower on the chair, and then she pulls out a sewing pin! Sometimes you think she’s crazy and other times she’s spot on.”

When I left my ex and Columbia, I would go with Mom to Nanny’s house in Hampton, South Carolina, where Mom was taking turns with her brother and sister to care for Nanny as she descended into Alzheimer’s and couldn’t live alone anymore.

Watching Mom, helping her care for her mother was strange. She had taken care of me my entire life, but I hadn’t witnessed her parenting of me or my brothers in this way, from the outside. I saw Mom practicing her brand of active love and care, with her incredible capacity for patience, in a losing battle. At least with children, the expectation is that they will grow and learn to take care of themselves. Instead, Mom was sacrificing herself to care for someone who was slipping backwards, losing the capacity to care for

herself. It was a demonstration of both a daughter's love as well as a mother's love, despite all that had passed between them.

They had been estranged when we were young kids and I only met her when I was ten. I probably learned more about Nanny's life that year, as she was forgetting it, than I had thought to ask about when she still had her wits about her. A lot of the stories I heard about Nanny were told because Mom stealth cleaned the house as soon as she started spending time there, unearthing stories with the stuff.

"If we are going to be living here, taking care of her, then we at least deserve an empty drawer to put things in, some space in the closet, and at least one clean surface in the guest room. This house is packed to the gills!" It was. Mom snuck out mouldy box after mouldy box of *her* grandmother's yarn collection, more Tupper Ware than any one person should own, and more books on quilting and other crafts than a book store dedicated to quilting and other crafts.

Mom also found a box of her father's old film negatives. People used to call him Electric Willy (his name was William, mainly Bill) because he would buy anything with a plug on it, always had some new camera he was fiddling with, and had more remotes to his television than an electronics store. He had died two years before; then Nanny started to decline. When I wasn't tanning in the yard or helping Mom clean, I spent hours with a scanner, scanning the old photos as Mom told stories about the people in the pictures.

"That's Nanny and Grandma P—her mom—out back here. I still have that old suit your grandma is wearing. Grandma P made it for Nanny's wedding."

"And that is Nanny at her graduation from Nursing college," Mom said, pointing out one of Nanny wearing a navy-blue cap and a crisp white nurse's hat.

"They must have been proud of her, living the American dream," I said.

“It really was the American dream. Two people from so far away, coming all the way to America to start a new life and then seeing your children succeed.” Grandma P had come from Denmark to New York when she in her early twenties and Grandpa P had met her there, having come from Italy. Nanny moved from Boston to South Carolina when she married my grandfather, Bill, who was a career navy man who spent years sailing around the globe while Nanny ran the house and raised the kids. In every photo of Nanny, all those negatives I scanned, she had a straight, proud back and stared straight at the camera.

The photos Mom found that year when she was cleaning gave faces to the characters she had told me about ever since I could remember. Mom’s favourite hobby, aside from gardening, was genealogy—it had been the thing to bring her and Nanny back together. Mom sent Nanny some family records she had found, out of the blue, after not speaking for ten years; Mom had defied her parents’ wishes by divorcing her husband and then sailing across the Atlantic in a sailboat. And she didn’t just research her own family, she researched my father’s as well. Both sides had what Dad called ‘escapees’: at least once in a generation there was someone who got out, escaped from under the typical expectations of family or society and set out to make their own way, often in other countries. Dad was one himself, going to Samoa with the Peace Corps and then emigrating to Australia to work on the railroad in the outback for a few years. (His brother stayed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, his entire life and only rebelled by becoming a lawyer instead of an engineer like their father.) Mom was one too; she may not have spent years abroad, but she sailed across the Atlantic and told her parents that she would not live up to their expectations but would be living up to her own instead. If it weren’t for their need to escape into some alternative life—in the most romantic sense—I wouldn’t be here. They met in Bermuda, boats docked side by side, both making the ocean crossing.

“Should we get some cheese to go with these apples?” Mom asked, holding up a bag of green Granny Smith apples and snapping me out of my thoughts.

I watched Mom peruse the cheese section and thought about how I just wanted a story as good as theirs. They had never purposefully put expectations on any of their children, aside from graduating from university, but they never told us what we could or could not study, or what careers to go for or where to live. But what if I was supposed to be the escapee and I don’t make it? Mom and Dad, in a very supportive fashion, always told us we could do anything we wanted to do. “Follow your bliss,” Dad would say, quoting Joseph Campbell. But what if I chose to emulate them and attempted to do something out of the ordinary, and I failed?

“Found some good steaks,” Dad said, putting the package into the buggy after meeting us in the potato chip (crisp) aisle. “Anything you want?” he gestured to the rows and rows and rows of potato chips.

“I never realized how many flavours there were, or how many of each chip they stock here, good lord.” I picked up a pack of Cheetos.

“I should have guessed,” Dad said.

“They don’t have these in England,” I said.

“Just don’t let me get started or I’ll eat the whole bag.”

My older brother, Joseph arrived that afternoon. He came in through the garage (we never use the front door) and announced himself as he came into the downstairs den where we were watching TV.

“Hello, hello, hello,” he said, dropping his bag on the floor and slipping off his sneakers, which he never tied. “How you doin’, sis?” he asked, giving me a one-armed hug.

“Not bad,” I said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you too. How’s London?”

“It’s great,” I said.

“Not ready to move back home?”

“Not yet.” I knew his words were half teasing, but he was also half serious. He may have loved me as a brother, but I think Joseph worried about me. As kids, he would get so mad when I would get out of calling to order the pizza, or when Mom would order for me at a restaurant. He wanted me to have to interact, and it was something I worked to avoid. I suffered from depression as a teenager and he would get so annoyed at my tears and he would tell me in an exasperated voice to “just be happy.” He had expected Mom to rush to my side after the assault because he was sure I needed her. Years later, when Mom and Dad finally visited (Mom waited until Dad agreed to fly over, and used all her credit card loyalty points to get first class tickets as an incentive to get Dad to come), Mom took a picture of me ordering drinks at a pub. When Joseph saw the picture, his reaction was “Look at you, ordering your own drink, all by yourself!” I couldn’t blame him for thinking of me as pathetically shy because I hadn’t provided much evidence to the contrary. Sure, I could move to London, but he was right to assume that that wouldn’t change me overnight.

“Can I get you a beer?” Dad asked after he had hugged his eldest son.

“I’ll take whatever you’re having,” Joseph said.

“We got PBR, how’s that,” Dad said heading up the stairs to the kitchen.

“Sounds good,” Joseph called after him. “When did Dad start drinking PBR?” he asked Mom. PBR stood for a brand called Pabst Blue Ribbon.

“Few weeks ago, he wanted something different,” Mom said.

“How many nights did you get drunk on PBR?” he asked me.

“PBR was too rich for us, we went with Natty Light,” I said, referencing the watered-down beer Natural Light, drunk by many university students across the South.

“God, Natty Light was like water.”

“How’s Kelly?” Mom asked.

“She’s good, with her parents and the whole family.” Kelly was his girlfriend of four years.

“How’s the new house?” I asked. They had just bought a house together, in Columbia. Joseph, Kelly, and I all went to the same University, and I had met and interacted with Kelly on a number of occasions. In general, however, Joseph and I did not see each other on campus, unless Mom was driving through town to go to her mother’s or one of us was in dire need of something. Once, I was eating lunch in the Student Union with Christian and Joseph walked up to me and said, “Nice shirt,” then walked away. We were both wearing the same purple t-shirt from a restaurant in Virginia that our parents had bought us as souvenirs. Even when we lived in the same city, we both received news of each other through Mom; it was a rare opportunity to hear straight from the source.

“It’s good, Kelly really likes it,” he said. Dad came out of the stairwell and handed Joseph a beer.

“How is that grand dog of mine?” Dad asked.

“He’s doing good, still licks you to death if you let him though,” Joseph said, cracking open the beer and sitting on the couch in front of the tv. “Did you see the game last night?” he asked Dad.

“The house is amazing, five bedrooms, with the master suite downstairs, so right now all they really have upstairs is Joseph’s man cave and the washer and dryer,” Mom said to me, still standing at the ironing board she kept behind the couch and used as a standing

desk, when she wasn't using it to iron. She went on describing the building and all the things they would be doing going forward, painting, furniture, etc. Joseph wasn't big on talking about himself. When he eventually asked Kelly to marry him, he was approached by someone at his engagement party.

"How do you know Joe and Kelly?" the man asked.

"I went to school with them," Joseph replied.

"How's the writing going?" Joseph asked, turning to look at me.

"Not too bad, so far," I said, keeping it vague.

"Have you stricken me from the record yet?" Dad asked.

"Not yet, Dad," I said with a sigh.

"Make sure you do," Dad said. I rolled my eyes at Mom. Dad hated the idea of being exposed by my writing. But how was I supposed to talk about my life without talking about him when he had home schooled me personally for ten years?

"You have any big plans while you're here?" Joseph asked, changing the subject.

"I want to go to Target and try on some skinny jeans," I said. "My perspective has changed, and my American cut boot legs are starting to feel like bellbottoms. Other than that, I plan to sit around and eat home cooked food."

"Even if it is mine," Mom joked.

Snow kept us confined to the house until Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Andrew and his wife, Jessica, were supposed to stop by but the snow had been falling steadily all night.

"I don't know why they are even trying," Dad said. He and Mom were standing at the sliding glass door in their bedroom at the end of the hall, looking out over the driveway.

Andrew and Jessica had called to say they had parked the car at the bottom of the mountain

and were going to hike up. Dad insisted on standing at the door to watch for them for the entire twenty-minute hike.

“Because they are trying to do the whole visiting the family at Christmas thing,” Mom said. “Trying to be good children.”

“Well they should show more sense than that,” Dad said.

“Giving your father a stroke for Christmas,” Joseph said. He was in the kitchen making toast. “Sounds like something Andrew would do.”

“Be nice,” I said to him with a smirk.

“Don’t say fuck,” he shot back.

“I fucking won’t,” I said.

“I could use a beer already,” Joseph said.

“Me too,” Dad called.

“They’re coming up the driveway,” Mom said as she came out to the kitchen. “Let’s go down and meet them.”

Andrew was the youngest child and had been dating Jessica since they were fifteen. They were married the month before I moved to England and were now living together in another part of North Carolina, finishing their final year at university.

The door to the garage opened and Andrew came in, a big smile on his face, Jessica trailing behind.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Dad said, giving Andrew a hug. “Cold out there?”

“Freezing,” Andrew said. “How is everybody? Sarah, Joe?” He gave Joseph a handshake and gave me one-armed hug.

“Doing good,” Mom said. “Come in and take off your coats.”

“How was the road?” Dad asked.

“The main road has been cleared, but obviously, yours is still covered,” Andrew said as he hung up his jacket.

“It wasn’t a bad walk up though,” Jessica said, smiling with red cheeks.

“You know you didn’t have to do that,” Dad said.

“Of course, we did,” Jessica said, “we couldn’t not see you guys on Christmas.”

“Are you hungry? Thirsty? Can I get you anything?” Mom asked.

“That’s ok,” Andrew said, taking a seat on the couch. “We’re eating at Jessica’s parents’ house later.”

“How’s school going?” Joseph asked.

“Good, almost done now,” Andrew said. “Only one semester left.”

“What are you going to do after?” Joseph asked. Joseph already had his master’s degree and was working as the head tennis pro at a local country club in Columbia.

“I’m starting the job search after the break, but I’ve got a lead on something up in Maryland.”

“Maryland?” Mom said.

“Nothing is settled yet, don’t worry,” Andrew said. “I’ll let you know when I know anything. But Maryland isn’t London, now is it? How’s that going, Sis?”

Andrew would get the job in Maryland, also running a tennis program at a country club, and he and Jessica would move just outside of Washington D.C. the next summer. Andrew always shocked me. As kids, he could never keep track of his Nintendo and as a teenager he could never keep track of his phone charger, and as of writing this, he has been married for eight years and has three children. Even then, seeing him get married at twenty-one, I didn’t know how he did it. How did he make looking like an adult seem like no big deal? And now, I know he is a good dad—I’ve seen him in action—but I still wonder if he

knows where his phone charger is. Joseph had practically begged our parents to make me take personal responsibility for my life, and I'd always felt justified that at least I was more responsible than Andrew. But it turned out Andrew had quietly soaked up Mom's lessons and would, within the next two years, become a university level tennis coach responsible for shepherding up to twelve girls around the country for tennis tournaments; the same way Mom had dragged Andrew and Joseph around the country for their junior tennis careers. How did he manage to hit all those milestones with such ease while I felt the need to chuck it all and move out of the country to start over again?

"London is amazing, though I'm actually living about half an hour outside of it," I said. "Which is perfect because it isn't so busy, but the train makes it super easy to get into central."

"And no other problems? I was pretty freaked out when Mom told me you'd been attacked," he said.

"Yes, that was terrifying," Jessica said.

"No other problems, and it actually got me into a better living space," I said. "Now I'm in the same flat as my friends."

"The same what?" Jessica asked.

"The same dorm," I said. "We share a kitchen, but I have my own bathroom."

"So, you beat him up with your umbrella?" Andrew asked.

"Obviously."

"Proud of you, Sis."

I was pleased that the assault was showing my brothers that I could take care of myself. It was one incident in my life, compared to the fact that their entire lives reflected that they could care for themselves (and their partners). I may have moved to London, but I

was not in the least financially responsible for myself, while they were both forging careers. It occurred to me later, after Andrew became a tennis coach, that perhaps it was the fact that they were athletes, that they had literally been trained in the world of tennis and then used that training to directly transfer into the working world. Joseph may not have stayed in the tennis business, but he used the networking and sportsmanship skills he had acquired in every single interaction he had. Being athletes gave them discipline, routine, a sense of accomplishment, an actual route to self-improvement in terms of ranking amongst their peers. They knew where they stood in terms of their skills and abilities.

At twelve, Mom and Dad gave me an ultimatum because I was no longer allowed to sit in my room alone reading all day: I could play tennis like my brothers or join the local Girl Scout troop. I chose the Scouts. Being the middle child, the peacekeeper, I was not competitive. I did not see the benefit of winning necessarily as it meant I would have to play again. I do not like conflict and tried most of the time—if I wasn't causing it by being a moody bitch—to alleviate or assuage, to make things better. I hated being in the way—probably because ninety percent of the time I was being carted along by one parent or another to one brother's tournament while the other parent took the other child. In order to not be in the way, I was quiet, fairly obedient, and tried to anticipate and meet needs before they were mentioned. In school I received good grades and finished my homework early because it made Dad happy, and he was far more pleasant when he was happy than not. At said tennis tournaments I always came equipped with a book and was prepared to read maps and hold anything handed to me. At home I cleaned without being asked because I knew it would make my mother happy and because it occasionally let me out of ordering the pizza—which I hated because it involved interacting with a stranger. (I still

don't like making appointments or ordering food over the telephone.) In a sexist way that I was fine with, it also let me out of mowing the lawn and cleaning the charcoal grill.

To my athlete brothers, I was shy and scared of strangers, was a bit of a brown nose, preferred books to people and the only thing I could do for myself was homework and housework. I am still those things. It just took me a long time to see them as pliable ideas about myself rather than definitive statements.

My brothers had sports as a way to define themselves outside of the home, but for ten home-schooled years—until I was seventeen—I lived wrapped up in and defined by my family. While it didn't provide the same lifelong sense of belonging that tennis had provided the boys, joining the Girl Scout troop did get me out of the house and provided the socialization I had been lacking. At my first Scout meeting, I experienced a small shift that would take me years to understand. For some reason I was extremely hyper that first afternoon, and as I knew one girl from my neighbourhood beforehand, I talked and couldn't stop talking. The anxiety—the jittery nerves—around going into an unfamiliar middle school to face a pack of unfamiliar girls, in conjunction with my hyperactivity made it impossible to act shy. And it worked. The girls liked me, I made a new best friend almost on the spot and it wasn't a painful experience. Years later, taking the group tour of Italy with Mom before college, and deciding to experiment with being an extrovert, made me realize that the choice to shed the shy behaviour like I had done that day with the Scouts—if not the anxiety—was more in my control than happening to consume a lot of sugar before meeting someone new. But it also highlighted the fact that my surroundings, as well as the people in them, had an impact on the choices I made about who I was and how I acted.

Being with my family made me one thing. Being with my family in a public setting, around other people, made me shrink. I became a warm body occupying space because that

was what was expected of me—they thought that was how I would act so that’s how I acted around them. Being away from my family, especially around people who did not know me, gave me the opportunity to be the same person my family knew I was in private without the fear of their teasing me for not being who they expected me to be in public.

Andrew and Jessica stayed for an hour and then put on their coats, hats and gloves and made their departure.

“Drive safe,” Dad said.

“Watch out for black ice,” Mom said. “And text me when you get to Jessica’s house.”

“Have a safe flight back, Sarah,” Andrew said, giving me a full hug.

“Love you, little brother,” I said.

Joseph stayed another night and when the weather cleared the next day and my parents’ road had been cleared, he took off back to Columbia.

“He gets bored up here,” Mom said as we waved him off down the driveway. “You’re the only one that could ever stand being here for very long after you’d moved out.”

“I also enjoy staying home and doing nothing,” I said, slipping back into the garage and heading for the den.

“And you can put up with your father,” she said.

“It helps that he buys me Cheetos and wine.”

“Let’s go upstairs and go through your closet,” she said, hanging up her jacket. We went up and found Dad settled into his chair in the living room with his book.

“We are going up to work on Sarah’s closet,” Mom said, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge as I headed for the steep stairs to the top floor.

“Have fun,” Dad said, not even looking up.

“You know we will,” I said.

My parents' former room wasn't stuffed but it was full. Every bookshelf was double stacked, and every drawer was loaded. After my breakup, I'd given most of my furniture to a former teacher turned friend who had just moved to a new house, and Joseph, who lived nearby, had taken a fair amount of kitchenware. Everything else had been boxed or bagged and dragged back to North Carolina. I'd unpacked when I moved home, but I hadn't purged much. I hadn't felt the need, probably because the move back had felt permanent in a sense, because when I moved home, I didn't have an immediate plan to move out again. And when I formulated the plan to go to school in England, it was for two years, which meant I still did not have a permanent location to base myself other than my parents' house. For some reason, after one semester in England, I felt ready to let some things go. For one, I knew that half of the clothes would never be suitable to take to England, because what was cool as a student in Columbia was not the same as what was cool in London. And for another, because I was trying to let go of who I had been in Columbia. I was enjoying the attempt to update myself, adjust my fashion and taste to my new country, and all my old things suddenly seemed unnecessary in my new life. In a few years, the need to purge would morph from the idea of cleaning out emotional baggage to being motivated by a fear of the cost of shipping unnecessary belongings across an ocean.

"It always feels so good to get stuff out of the house," Mom said, carrying two tote bags full of clothing down the stairs a few hours later.

"I like to think that someone else will get some use out of all this stuff, rather than it just sitting around up there," I said, holding a large stack of books.

"Dad and I will drop it off downtown next week," Mom said. "I can't believe it's already time for you to go. Let's put these in the garage for now."

“I still have one more day,” I said, putting the books on the ping-pong table Mom and Dad used as staging area in the garage.

“I know,” she said. “I just miss doing all the little things with you, like this, or running around town. Going shopping with your Dad is just not the same.”

“You mean because even when he says he is going to sit patiently at the front of the store and wait for you, you just know he’s there, reading his book and checking his watch.”

“Or he gets the one thing he was looking for and then asks if you’re done yet.”

“I miss you too, Mom,” I said. “You should come visit soon.”

“Not until I can convince your Dad to go,” she said. “We should go find him, he should be getting out of the shower and making drinks soon.”

We left for the airport four hours early. Dad can’t stand having somewhere to go and always leaves an hour before he said he would the night before. Mom drove and Dad sat in the back seat so I could soak up the view one last time before I flew out. The car rumbled down the gravel driveway and the house was slowly obscured by mountain slopes and tree trunks.

It takes forty-five minutes to arrive at the Asheville Regional Airport from my parents’ house. It consists of one newsstand before security and one small bar and newsstand after security to service the two short concourses. There is hardly anything on offer to those waiting to go through security except rows of chairs and a corner art gallery. Dad found a seat and sat with his book and my bags while Mom and I went outside for a final cigarette.

“I should probably let you guys go soon,” I said to Mom.

“We can stay as long as you want,” she said, pulling on her cheap *Eagle* cigarette. She thought if she bought the cheap nasty ones that would make her stop smoking them. Or at least she wouldn’t be paying as much for her habit.

“I feel bad making you sit around, and I know Dad will be antsy to get home before five.”

“He’s always antsy to get home, but he’ll be fine.”

“I guess, I’m afraid that prolonging saying goodbye for too long might make me cry,” I said.

“We’ll finish these, then go to the bathroom, then you can go through security,” she said.

“I want to go back,” I said. “I just miss you guys.”

“We miss you too. So much. But we are so happy to know that you are happy over there and having a good time. We’d much rather you be happy over there than be selfish and have you here.”

That Christmas break made me feel schizophrenic. I kept flipping between feeling perfectly at home, as though I had never left, as though London was a dream, and feeling as though I had been gone for years. I felt as though there was nowhere else in the world I could be, should be, and then feeling as if I had to get back to Kingston immediately to prove it existed, that I did live there. Texting Felicia on our American cell phones helped remind me I did have a life outside those four walls, my life had not shrunk back to the edge of my parents’ property lines, but leaving them at security, even with tears in my eyes, made me feel taller, as though I really was an adult because I had to leave my parents, I had a life to return to.

The flight back to London was so different than the one I had taken just months before. That flight had been such a big step, going alone, going without Mom, literally flying off to find my new life. I didn't know what I was going to, only that I was finally going somewhere. I didn't know if I'd like it, or make any friend, or feel as if I fit in there more than I did at home. But I felt good knowing that I was doing something, taking action, even if it proved to be the wrong one. Returning to London, to the new life I'd built with my gang of friends, made me more excited than nervous. I even had someone to meet me at Heathrow.

I worried, though, how the second semester was going to alter the little world I'd spent the last four months building. Second semester always changed things. The girls on my floor, in my first year university dorm, literally held a meeting to discuss the way things had changed over Christmas; the mood on the floor was far more subdued, there were fewer TV viewings, fewer nights out, and it felt as if the excitement and joy of being first year students had leached away with the posting of first semester's grades. How would life in London change with the spring? The second semester shift was inevitable since we'd spent the first finding our feet, the second was bound to include some new form of branching out.

* * *

Stephanie, an Asian undergraduate from California who shared our flat, was standing outside the arrivals gate waving. Though a few years younger than the rest of us, and several inches shorter, Stephanie had the confidence of a bulldog: low to the ground but fierce and loyal. She fed us her mother's recipes every chance we gave her and was generous with her belongings, though steam once poured out her ears when a friend used a

knife and cut grooves into her non-stick pan. She had a habit of wandering into my room for a chat, if she wasn't Facebook messaging me, and then disappearing again to do her own thing. She'd spent Christmas in London and planned to spend the next two months traveling alone through Europe and Turkey before moving back to the States for her final year of school.

"My friend, Greg, is going to be staying in my room for a few weeks, while I'm gone," Stephanie said as we boarded the bus from Heathrow to Kingston. "His dorm was only a nine-month lease, for some dumb reason. I told him you'd be down the hall."

"I hate that you're leaving me so soon," I said.

"You'll be fine," she drawled. "The girls will be back soon."

"Just promise you'll be safe," I said.

"You're such a mother," she laughed.

"Just send a message periodically, let us know you're ok."

"I can't wait to get out there, I want to see as much as I can before I go home."

A few days later there was a knock at my door. It was Stephanie's friend, Gregg.

"I just wanted to let you know I was here now," he said. "But I've got some friends in the flat below us. I was going to go hang out down there, if you wanted to come." Other than Gregg, I was the only person in our dorm. No one else was back from Christmas break yet, and Stephanie was on her way to Turkey. I didn't want them to come back and ask me what I had been doing while they were away and the only thing I could say was that I spent the time sitting in my room, alone, watching television on my computer. If I wanted the second semester to be just as interesting as the first, just as full of new things and people and places, then I couldn't be scared to keep branching out. I had found a circle of friends,

but I couldn't forget that I had moved abroad alone; I was perfectly capable of accepting an invitation to a party in the same building.

The room directly beneath my own was dark except for the fairy lights strung above the desk and the light coming from the computer screen. There were five or six other people in the room making it crowded. Sitting on the end of the bed was a guy I recognized but didn't know. Stephanie and I had seen him crossing the street in front of the dorm. "He looked like a cross between Robert Pattinson and Hayden Christianson," Stephanie had said.

"I'm Freddie," he said. "Who are you?" His voice was higher pitched than I'd expected. About three hairs were visible on his chest due to his extremely low V-neck t-shirt.

"How old are you?" he asked. I should have known then that he was young.

"Twenty-three," I said, still standing awkwardly near the door.

"Oh, I'm twenty. That's not too bad," he said. I remember telling Felicia about this exchange over Skype before she came back from Kentucky. I'd thought the boy was gay when I heard him speak but was shocked by his immediacy and directness.

The group migrated down to the riverside, to sit on the rock wall in Canbury Gardens. Someone brought out a couple of spliffs and passed them around the circle. Freddie made a point to lean on the rock wall next to me, close enough for our shoulders to touch.

The next week, when the Felicia and Krissy had returned from Christmas break, we were sat around the kitchen when Freddie strolled in.

"How did you get in here?" I ask.

"Someone was walking out as I came up," he said. "I didn't have your number."

He did, however, have a new girlfriend, one he went 'Facebook official' with not long after we met. We never met the girlfriend, of course, and he didn't talk about her.

Stephanie returned from her travels in time for her twenty-first birthday party in the middle of February, which started with Jager bombs at the Druid's Head, a pub off the ancient marketplace. I blamed the Jager for making me forget how I ended up on the dance floor of the big club, *Oceana*, kissing Freddie. I pulled away from him and looked over his shoulder to see Stephanie, Felicia, and Krissy holding each other up, their laughter drowned out by the music. I'd had no intention of going beyond heavy flirting with Freddie, and had sort of figured he was safe, since he had other interests. But I didn't care enough to stop as it fed my vanity.

"You're my first American," he said. We were on the street holding hands, stumbling back to the dorms. "Am I your first Brit?"

"Yes," I said. "Wait, no, you aren't." I'd forgotten about Krissy's flatmates.

* * *

For Saint Patrick's Day, Krissy, Anna, Steve and I went to Ireland. I'd met Anna, an opera singer from Ohio, during an 'Understanding Britain' course for overseas students at the school. The class met once a week for five weeks and would discuss points of difference in Britain to other parts of the world; there was a day to talk about British newspapers, governments, learning and teaching protocols. One day the class was talking about the British education system and the teacher wanted to compare it to the American system. She looked at Anna and me who were the only two Americans in the class. We both answered, "I was home schooled."

Steve was in the same writing course as Krissy, Felicia, and me, and was from California and always appeared as if he'd slept in his clothes. The first time we hung out with him, he'd talked about the girls he'd been into, flipping his hands about as he did so.

"So, you're hetero?" Felicia had asked him.

"Yea, but I think it's funny when people get confused," he said. We privately called him Semi-Gay Steve from then on.

The first night in Ireland had to be recounted to me the next morning after I woke up naked, next to Steve in a single bed. "So...clothes?" Steve suggested, handing me a shirt.

I walked into the kitchen and Krissy and Anna made no effort to hide their gossipy glee.

"I couldn't find my underwear," I said.

"I tried to stop you," Anna said. "I put you in bed and everything. Then you got up saying you were going to the bathroom and you never came back."

"At least you tried." Pulling open drawers, looking for a coffee spoon, I found my cell phone in with the utensils.

"I forgot we did that!" Krissy said. "To stop you texting Freddie."

I was mortified. I was pleased they had stopped me from texting Freddie all night which would have made it appear as if I were obsessed with him and had nothing better to do. I was not pleased that I had let myself get black out drunk and slept with Semi-Gay Steve. I was supposed to be expanding my horizons, 'finding myself' even, not losing control and doing things my sober self would cringe to hear I'd been a part of. Maybe, subconsciously, my desire to be a *Sex in the City* kind of girl got the best of me, and maybe it was just the Bushmills whisky.

Back in Kingston, the group reconvened at the *Slug and Lettuce* for happy hour where we regaled the others with tales of our trip; of riding bikes for six miles and not being able to walk properly for the next two days; of attempting to teach Steve how to ride a bike at all; climbing around old ruins with no other people in sight; and quotes from the old man, named Ted Kennedy, who drove us to the grocery store to get food and said, “Back in my day, a boy was a boy and a girl was a girl and pansy was just a flower.” Krissy even brought two Irish boys back from the local pub only to stand up an hour later and say, “I’m done. Goodnight.” When Anna had convinced the boys to leave, Krissy trotted down the stairs and asked, “Are they gone? Is there anymore tuna salad left?”

“Krissy, you’re terrible,” Felicia said.

“She’s such a tease,” Steve said.

“I never said I was going to do anything with them,” Krissy said, slopping her drink onto the table. Anna absent-mindedly laid a napkin over the pool of vodka cranberry.

“I meant leaving the others to get rid of them,” Felicia said. “I would have done an Irishman, I just would have seen him out the door myself.”

“Probably two minutes after it was over,” Steve said.

“That’s two minutes more than you’d get,” Felicia winked.

“When I was done with you,” Steve smiled, “you’d let me spend the night.”

“You two are so gross, just do it already,” Krissy laughed.

Steve and Felicia just laughed. They both enjoyed making others uncomfortable, and if it was in a sexual way, all the better. But I think the fact that Freddie was the only one at the table who didn’t completely understand the context—that I had already slept with Steve—was making each jibe a little sweeter for Steve and Felicia.

“Ok, folks,” I said, “finish your drinks so we can go to *Bacchus* and dance.”

"I have to pee first," Anna said. The girls trooped as one to the toilets and when we returned Steve was the only one at the table.

"What happened to Freddie?" I asked. "Isn't he coming with us?"

"He said he'd meet us there," said Steve.

Freddie did not meet us there. He'd gone back to the dorm.

Bacchus was an underground bar that's been rumoured to be a renovated public toilet. It's not far off the mark. The walls appeared to be slightly damp in the dim lighting and the ceiling was low, giving the entire place a cave-like vibe. Standing at the bar, yelling above the music, Steve explained.

"As soon as you guys left the table," Steve said, "Freddie patted me on the back and said, 'You'll get there, mate.' Being a touch condescending."

"'You'll get there' as in...sleep with one of us?" Felicia asked.

"Yea," Steve said. "So, I told him 'I've already been there, mate.'" Steve leaned against the bar and nodded at the girl pulling beers.

"You did not," I said, slapping him on the shoulder.

"And you didn't tell him, because?" Felicia asked me.

"Hello, he's got a fucking girlfriend," Krissy said, accepting a plastic cup of vodka and cranberry.

"And it's not me," I said, taking my own plastic cup.

"I didn't think he'd get that upset," Steve shrugged.

"Do you think I should go find him?" I asked. I hadn't told Freddie about Steve because it wasn't his business and being with Steve had obviously meant nothing if I couldn't remember it.

"No," Krissy said.

“At least finish your drink,” Felicia said. Krissy pushed her cup against Felicia’s and said, “Cheers!”

“We did pay to get in here,” I said. He could wait. That was the beauty of not being the girlfriend, I thought. I didn’t want to explain my behaviour to him and pretending as if I didn’t owe him anything assuaged my guilt for an hour or two longer.

Back in the dorm it took coaxing over texts to get Freddie to come up stairs and talk to me. He sat on the bed next to me and hung his head, his elbows resting on his knees.

“You were the only pure thing in my life,” he said, sobbing slightly.

That surprised me. I couldn’t think what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I patted him on the back and hugged him around the shoulders. Anna opened the door, looking for her shoes, and promptly backed out again when she saw the confusion on my face, Freddie sobbing with his head down.

“I’m not dating you, though,” I said.

“I just had this image,” he said.

“I’m sorry I’m not the pure thing you imagined me to be, but at the same time I’m not going to apologize for having a life. Especially when you have a girlfriend.” I was taken aback by his emotion. I knew he had a crush on me, the same way I had a crush on him, and it was fun, but I hadn’t thought of it as consequential. He had a girlfriend, and his willingness to flirt with and kiss me had made me assume he wasn’t too worried about consequences or the possibility of hurting someone’s feelings. I knew he had a girlfriend, which was part of the appeal because it meant I wasn’t responsible for the entire relationship, someone else could deal with his emotional side, I was supposed to be the side piece, the fun and games. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t moral, but I didn’t want to think about right or moral. Freddie was

supposed to be candy, something sweet but not a main course. Freddie's angelic image of me felt ridiculous. By virtue of the fact I was the other woman, how could I be pure? Or was he more upset that Steve had bested him? That effeminate Steve had been where he'd been planning to go, and first? I had not experienced my own behaviour hurting someone in this context before, bruising an ego and creating the crushing feeling the experienced is named after. I was a little proud of myself. Though I was ready for him to pull it together and go back to his own room so that I could then knock on Felicia's door and talk to the others about how strange a night it had been.

"If we were dating," Freddie said, "would you be more affectionate?" It was days later, and Freddie was sitting on my bed, leaning against the wall, playing with a thin white headband he'd taken to wearing to keep his hair off of his face; some girl had left it in his room.

"What do you mean?" I was sitting in my desk chair, loading another episode of *Trailer Park Boys*, a show I'd watched with Neil.

"Like, would you show more affection, be nicer?"

"Nicer? If we were dating it would be different."

I told Felicia about the conversation later that night. This time I was sitting on her bed and she was spinning around in the desk chair. "You do act like an ice queen when he's around," she said.

"How so?" I squinted at her.

"You sit there with your arms crossed so he can't hold your hand, or you don't really look at him but address everyone else instead. Like you don't really care if he's there."

“He’s got a girlfriend,” I said.

“But he’s really into you and you know it,” she said, practically singing the last part.

“Ok. I do kind of like the control,” I said. Felicia raised her eyebrows and chuckled.

“What? I’ve never been in this position before,” I said.

“The other woman? The older woman?” Felicia asked.

“I’ve been the other woman, with Christian once,” I said. “His girlfriend totally read his journal and found out. Her reading that journal entry is the only thing I envy her for. And maybe it is because Freddie’s younger and I don’t feel so naïve this time. Because you’re right, I do know he has a girlfriend. So, my investment is not nearly so loaded.” Maybe I wasn’t naïve this time, and maybe that was worse.

“The upper hand,” she said, nodding her head, her feet propped up on her desk. Slowly she leaned forward to pick at a hole in the toe of her sock.

“I see why guys do it,” I said. “It’s kind of a rush to have the upper hand.”

“No shit, sex is power,” Felicia said.

“I’ve just never used it that way myself. Had it used on me, of course.”

“Explain,” she said.

“Well a guy doesn’t have to take off his pants to show you a thigh tattoo and then say, ‘we’re already naked, we might as well.’”

“Yea, not so good,” she said. “I slept with a guy because he was leaving for Afghanistan the next day.”

“That’s at least a little noble,” I laughed.

“Yes, let’s go with noble,” she said.

“The only guy I actively pursued, actually had to convince to have sex with me,” I said, “was my first.”

“You had to convince him?”

“He kept asking if I was sure.”

“And the others?”

“This is bad, but I honestly don’t remember starting to sleep with Steve, so I can’t really say there. And yes, the others, there was a bit of pressure.”

There was a pause where we both looked off in different directions. “It’s basically pathetic.”

“I can’t say all my experiences were perfect either,” Felicia said. “But the point is to learn to do it for yourself.”

* * *

I emailed Christian and asked if we could arrange to Skype. A few days later, my computer started ringing and then the video connected. We both sat with blank, cream coloured walls behind us.

“How long have we been doing this?” I asked.

“How long have we known each other?”

“You know how much I like you?” I said.

“I also know I’ve hurt you a few times, too,” he said.

“I’m thinking we should stay as is,” I said. “Not think about more.”

“Stay in the grey zone, you mean?” he asked. That space between being an official couple and just being friends with benefits was what we called the grey zone.

“No, I mean just be friends. We’ve done it before,” I said. “And I just don’t think being grey is much different, considering we don’t see each other that often. And you said you’re going to be making more business trips to America this year, rather than London.”

“I think I’ve subconsciously taught you to hold me at arm’s length,” he said. “Which was, unfortunately, probably in your best interest. My behaviour hasn’t always matched what I’ve said.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I did myself any favours when it came to you,” I said. “But I’m having fun here, and I’m sure there are plenty of people you’re interested in there.”

“I do hope grey doesn’t become my new relationship model, though,” he said.

“When you find her, it won’t be grey,” I said.

When I hung up, I went to Felicia’s room next door to download.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if I saw him again,” I said. “But it’s not going to be the same.”

“You seem fine about it,” Felicia said.

“I am actually.”

I’d known Christian since before my first real relationship. In fact, my relationship with Neil was essentially a rebound from another attempt at trying to be with Christian. He wasn’t calling me like he said he would, and there was Neil, ready and willing. “I was surprised when you told me you were dating him,” Mom had said after our breakup. “I thought you would have waited for Christian to come around.” In five years of attempts, constantly interrupted by other people, other crushes, other relationships and jealous partners, we’d finally reached a point where we could be together—despite the distance—but weren’t necessarily so inclined anymore. We weren’t the same people we’d been at the start. He wasn’t just the guy with a culinary degree and ballroom dancing skills who

happened to be studying international business and I wasn't just the girl who lived on his floor.

"Christian was torn between saving the world and making millions and while I don't know what I want exactly," I said, "I know I don't want to follow him to work meetings and be expected to show up at functions for solar panels."

"Be his trophy wife?" she said.

"An accessory to make someone else look good. I did that already and its bullshit. Not that I think he would be that way explicitly, but in a way, I think that's how he saw me. I'd been to Europe when he hadn't, I had a relatively easy path when he didn't, and I think he sort of saw me as aspirational. But he came to Europe and lived here and is so ambitious. I don't think I'm ambitious enough for him, and I'm sure if he hasn't figured that out by now, he would soon."

"So why were you hung up on him for so long?"

"Initially it was his ambition, the fact that he wanted to get out and do something. I guess I thought maybe I could go with him."

"You mean compared to your ex, who was trying to sway you to go to California for school so he could go with you?"

"Exactly. I didn't feel like I had the ability to carry myself, let alone be responsible for someone else's dreams. It's not really fair to ask of someone."

* * *

A month after Freddie asked me about being more affectionate, he broke up with his girlfriend. He messaged, asked me to meet him in his room. He told me he'd ended it.

“That’s good. I think being on your own for a while will be good for you, give you some time to get to know yourself. I mean you’ve never really been single, from what you’ve told me.” I knew it was condescending. From what I’d learned he’d essentially been a beautiful teen who’d had his pick of girls ever since he hit puberty and that they had in fact distracted him from things like sports and studies. He didn’t know what it was to be on his own. But I hadn’t told him to break up with her. It wasn’t in my plans to replace her. I went back upstairs, and Felicia came into my room.

“He messaged me. Told me what happened,” she said. “You mind if I go down there and talk to him?”

“Of course not, just tell me what he says.”

She came back a while later. “He’s a little upset,” she said. “I think he thought that if he broke up with her, you would go out with him.”

“He just dumped her,” I said. “I don’t want to be his rebound.”

She shrugged her shoulders, “I think it’s sort of now or never for him. Besides, isn’t he basically a rebound for you?” In a real sense Felicia was right, I had not attempted to trust anyone, other than her, in the way I had trusted my ex. Granted, proper trusting Freddie was always going to be a risk based on the simple fact of his previous relationship. But, after the fact it seemed easy to see, there was also the feeling that it never seemed like something that would last very long anyway. At the time, the first year of our course felt very much like the first year of university, where the slightest amount of time or the smallest change of dynamics could alter everything. Dating Freddie felt like a time sensitive matter because it was; there had always been an expiration date attached, it was just a matter of being aware of the time left and choosing to spend it in a specific way.

* * *

Felicia had a trial shift as a waitress at a restaurant on the river. *Ha Ha Bar and Grill*, where we'd eaten together the first day we met, had closed and reopened as *Browns Bar and Brasserie*. Her trial was the day of the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. We'd planned to watch the wedding together, as a group, but one by one the other girls found part time jobs and became busy. Krissy, having made the decision to get a boyfriend for a month, had done just that when she started her job. Since we'd met Patrick we had seen less of Krissy. I watched the wedding in the basement of the dorm building—a set-up of two couches and a TV—with some girl who lived in the building that I'd never met. The wedding was gorgeous and opulent and made me think of Cinderella, but I was disappointed to be witnessing a piece of history alone. I kept my eye on my phone hoping to hear from Freddie.

Felicia had managed to slowly, hour by hour, alter her sleeping habits to the point that she would get up in the afternoon to go to work for the evening shift, come home around eleven to start writing around one a.m. only to go to sleep as the sun was coming up.

"I'm turning into a vampire," she said. With no job to go to, and a regular sleeping schedule, I often spent my days either doing school work and writing or hanging out with Freddie.

One day in June, Freddie and I went to Wimbledon to watch the tennis. We disembarked from the train and walked up the hill, past the tournament volunteers wearing green vests and offering information and directions to tourists.

“My Mom and I came here a few years ago,” I said as we walked. “Not during the tournament but we saw centre court and the little museum that houses the trophies.”

Mom and I had come to England when I was sixteen. It was our first trip together, the one that sparked six years of travel. The objective was to visit the American University in Richmond, which wasn't far from Wimbledon. (As an American I would say it was a few towns over, but that denotes a sense of space between the towns. The word suburb might suffice, as neighbourhoods bumping back to back against each other. Perhaps the English would deem them villages, as hamlets might sound too small a word. Either way, Richmond was just up the river from Kingston, and it was strange, looking back, to think we had been so close to the place I would actually attend years later.) We also visited the American University in Paris. I'd been talking to Dad, while he was having his five o'clock beer on the deck, overlooking the valley below. My older brother, Joseph, had received his acceptance letter to the University of South Carolina and I was starting to think of where I would end up.

“What would you think if I went to college overseas?” I'd asked.

“That would be too cool,” he said. “You know who you should talk to? Rich Aronson's wife, she runs a program in Florence. She might be able to talk to you about it. I think his daughter went to school in Paris.” Dad would get an idea in his head and take it to all possible lengths, who to call, books to read, other places to consider.

Mom came home and Dad and I told her our plan. Ten days later—thanks to Mom's practical research and booking abilities—Mom and I were on a plane to London.

Richmond was beautiful, idyllic and green, and the school was at the top of a hill, yards away from the entrance to a huge and wild park full of deer, and it was only minutes to an overlook showing a bend in the Thames. The school itself was housed in one large,

gothic building with yellowed-stone walls and turrets, a sweeping gravel drive and lush grounds. Our tour guide was an American girl who went on and on about how comfortable she was, despite being far from home, how convenient it was to live within walking distance of town, only a short train journey into the centre of London. I could picture myself there.

The school in Paris was spread out, different classrooms and offices in random, unmarked buildings scattered across multiple winding backstreets. Mom remarked to our guide that we'd had difficulty finding the school due to lack of signage. The guide replied it was a relatively new safety precaution, not advertising their location too openly. Mom and I looked at each other, questioning the need for such measures.

Paris was sepia toned, as though walking through old photographs. My neck cramped because I couldn't stop looking at the grand buildings lining the boulevards or the smaller but equally decorated apartment buildings along the smaller lanes. Paris kept my eyes wide open because when looking up, when looking at the buildings, or in the distance at the parks and lanes, it was magical, as if filtered through a gossamer scarf. But my eyes were also wide open when looking at street level where there were severe faces, and foreign voices speaking a language that I didn't know, and it seemed impossible to picture myself fitting in among them.

Richmond felt more like my hometown, if I'd lived in town rather than half an hour outside of it in the woods, and if my hometown had anything other than bicycle repair or climbing and hiking gear shops. Richmond had everything one would need for day-to-day life; there were boutiques, chain stores, restaurants and bars, the riverside and the park. It was less grand than Paris, which had a Rococo sense of romanticism—overly frilled and tightly laced—compared to the pastoral cosiness of Richmond. Even London itself felt more like a village, humbler and more ready-to-wear compared to the slightly pompous and

pressed feeling of Paris. I felt I could operate in Richmond, but would quickly become lost in Paris, if only because I could not locate the school buildings. Richmond offered a sense of belonging, and Paris felt as if I'd be left very much to myself and doubly isolated by the language.

I spent months dreaming of days spent in Richmond Park, or walking next to the river. But in the end, I decided I was not ready to leave home, to go so far away and not be capable of quick weekend visits. I could not imagine missing Thanksgiving, my favourite holiday, because I wouldn't have the holiday off to fly home; I would have to wait until Christmas to see my family again. No one would be able to quickly or easily come to my rescue. Those four months, from September to December seemed so long, more than a quarter of a year. I couldn't imagine it. I went to the school my brother went to in in South Carolina, three hours away, instead.

Walking up the hill to the tennis tournament with Freddie, reminded me of walking through this neighbourhood with my mother. We'd come to see the club because I'd grown up watching the tournament on TV every year. Even when I went to summer camp to avoid being dragged around to my brothers' junior tennis tournaments, all the girls would try to persuade our tennis coach to let us watch the pros at Wimbledon during the rainy days. At the time of that first visit with Mom, I wasn't even aware that the tournament took its name from the town.

"When we got directions to come out here," I said, "we were told to go to a different train stop, which I realize now was to avoid this climb." I was glad not to avoid it that day. The road was wide, and the trees planted along it were old, tall and throwing out plenty of shade during the hot June day. The houses repeated themselves, climbing up the hill, one by one, all the same yet slightly individualized with painted front doors, patterns of stained-

glass across the windows. What an American would call front yards, but the English would call gardens, were a mish mosh of flower beds, grass patches, gravel drives, and paved slabs. The repetition was comforting. The patterns indicated that there would always be another, there would always be something familiar just ahead, and though you might get lost because it all looked the same, it was comforting to see the boundaries respected within such a concentrated community. There were terraced houses that went on for ages. I thought of my parents' house, the house I'd done most of my growing up in, how it was nestled out in the woods on the side of a mountain and in summer when the leaves were out there were no neighbours in sight and it was only when the leaves fell that there was evidence of other inhabitants on the mountain. In Columbia I had lived in what we called a duplex. It took me a while to pick up the English terms, like semi-detached and terraced housing.

That day Freddie and I sat on Henman Hill (because I refuse to call it Murray Mount) and drank Pimm's while we watched matches on the big screen. I thought of Mom and Dad, and Joseph and Andrew, all watching the matches at home, and how odd it was that I was here, on this side of the television, me and not them. I'd managed to end up in the vicinity of the place where I'd dreamt about living at sixteen but had put aside because I was too scared to be alone so far away. And now I was attending an event that had been part of my family's summer television programming since before I could remember. There was an element of living in a memory that I'd never actually had.

I accepted a fresh cup of Pimm's from Freddie and only half listened as he talked about seeing himself on the big screen when the cameras had panned over the crowds. I thought of my brothers, had they been there with me. They would have had shit eating grins on their faces looking at Freddie. His button-down shirt was open down his chest, the

sleeves rolled up to his elbows and he kept flicking his head to shake the hair from his eyes. He was wearing flip-flops and jeans with the cuffs rolled above his ankles. "The camera always manages to find me," Freddie said smiling.

* * *

In the few days before Freddie left to spend August at home working at a football (or soccer) camp we spent a lot of time watching *Come Dine With Me* in his room. At the end of an episode, Freddie reached over and paused the video player on his giant Apple computer screen.

"We've got to get out of this room," he said, standing up and searching for his shoes.

"Where do you suggest we go?" I asked.

"Anywhere, I just can't watch another episode."

"We'll go for a coffee then," I said, grabbing my purse and slipping on my boots. We went across the street from the dorm and into the *Bentalls Centre*, riding the long escalator up to the top floor *Costa Coffee*. When the barista handed over our drinks we stood outside the shop and looked over the railing down into the atrium at the shoppers below.

"Have you started looking for housing yet?" Freddie asked.

"No, not yet, but we figure with the four of us it won't be too hard to find a place," I said. Krissy, Anna, Felicia, and I had already agreed we would live together when our lease with the dorms ended. The search for housing was not as easy as I would have imagined it, as our current lease left us starting our search after most of the good places were gone, coupled with the fact that when I told the estate agent we wanted to be within walking

distance of campus she piled us in her Mini Cooper and drove us two stops down the train line to New Malden.

“Have you found people to live with yet?” I asked.

“Found some from the school, we’re going to all meet up soon, get to know each other before we start looking.”

“It’ll be nice, not to live in the dorm,” I said. “Not that this isn’t an excellent place, especially when I think about my freshman dorm. You’ve really had it lucky.” It was easy to see the bright side of things when standing in *Bentals* with all the bright light bouncing off the marble and the neon signs shining over glass windows. Technically it was a mall, but it felt nothing like the sprawling suburban malls in America. Instead, it was a compact four floor shopping haven.

“How do you mean?”

“For starters, we have our own bathrooms here,” I said, thinking about our little pod-like bathrooms that fit perfectly in the corner of our rooms. “My first year we had hall bathrooms, with four showers and four toilets for twenty girls. The cinderblock walls were a nice warm touch too.”

“That’s a lot of girls,” he said.

“It was. And, of course, we had roommates,” I said. “We should go sit by the river.”

“You had to share a room?” Freddie said as he moved towards the escalator. We both stepped on and continued our conversation as we made our way to the ground floor and exited onto the high street. (Technically it’s called Clarence Street, but in general, I believe, High Street ends up referring to the big shopping street.)

“I roomed with an Asian girl my first year; she had a really deep voice...until she spoke to a boy.”

“Did you always share a room?” Freddie asked, dogging a child running with a balloon and an ice cream. There were people everywhere, with more and more flesh on display as the weather stayed warm.

“Well I shared a room with a girl second year, but we had a bathroom for only four people. Third year the two of us got an apartment and then senior year I lived with my boyfriend. We lived in two different houses before I moved back home.”

“Wow,” he said. There was a carousel set up in front of *Accessorize* and a little girl cried and cried as she went up and down and around. We moved into the ancient market place and the fruit and vegetable vendors shouted out the prices of their wares and all the little old ladies pulled trollies behind them as they went from stall to stall smelling the fruit and squeezing the tomatoes.

“One address per year since I left home. And even before that we lived in three or four places. And now I’ve had two addresses in England.”

We walked in silence for a moment, passing through the Charter Quay passage and out to the Riverside where all the nice restaurants lined the bank of the Thames. We took a left and walked down to the brick wall in front of *The Ram*. Across the water was the tow path that led around the bend to Hampton Court Palace. We sat down on the wall and dangled our feet over the water. Kingston would change, in so many small and large ways, over the next few years—old buildings torn down to make way for new student living, the entire riverside redone with five new restaurants added. Back then, everything around me seemed as if it had been there forever. It took years of watching the London skyline evolving through the train window to understand the concept that for a city to survive for thousands of years it would obviously need to evolve. When, or if, I left Kingston, it would keep

evolving without me. At that moment, I was just glad to know my next house would still be in that ancient market town.

“That’s a lot of places,” Freddie said. He started twisting a strand of hair around his finger and stared off into the distance.

“I’ve never actually listed them out before, counted them.” I sipped from my coffee. I felt slightly impressed with myself, that maybe my lack of a situated home life hadn’t been so bad for me after all.

“This is the first place I’ve lived outside of home,” Freddie said. His dorm was the same size room as Felicia’s several floors above, with the layout reversed. He had a few schoolbooks and notebooks on the shelf above his computer and multiple bottles of hair product and scent on his dresser. There were coloured in pictures of Pokémon, pulled from a colouring book, taped to his closet door, signed with a heart.

It felt as though facts of my past were coming to light and frightening him. Apparently, he’d told his mother about the group of American girls he’d met, about me. Looking at a photo of me he’d shown her, she said, “There’s more to her.” Was this what she had meant? When he’d learned about Steve and Ireland, he’d shut down because his image of me had shattered. He’d found out that I had a life, made choices that didn’t concern him, that I wasn’t pure or perfect or just for him. Then he learned that I’d lived in enough locations to lose count. What had that meant to him, I wondered.

I’d never made someone feel small before—except for the kid I’d called fat in the first grade—and it made me feel big. Calling the kid fat had made me feel heavy with guilt because there was obviously ill intention in my words. This interaction with Freddie, however, was simply factual and those facts made me feel as if I did have experiences to my name, I had been around, thank you very much. And I had been made to feel small before,

purposefully I believe, to feel as if my experiences didn't count. So, it felt good to be the experienced one. I hadn't meant to make him realize anything about himself or his life—if he even did—I was just chatting about mine, but to almost physically feel Freddie retreat ever so slightly into himself, to see the thoughts working behind his eyes when I peeked up at him from over the lip of my coffee cup, I felt a little surge of power. I know more than him, I've done more than him. Even before leaving my country to live in a new one, I'd done more than him. I had the upper hand when it came to experience and I'd never had that before. I left home because I wanted something over the people I left at home, I wanted to feel like I'd done something more; I didn't expect to feel that over a local, though I realized it was also a result of having three years over him. I'd had the time and the experiences ordained by that time, but I'd never experienced my place in relation to others in such a way that made me feel positively about what I had managed in my life so far. His moment of crisis, which would slowly begin to expand over the coming summer, made my feeling of being in a constant state of crisis seem less severe.

Of course, this was all from my point of view. I don't actually know how he felt about what I had said. I created reactions for him, because these were the things that occurred to me as I spoke to him. I imagine my words had an impact, when I have no way of knowing what that impact was. But the interaction sparked something for me, changed the way I thought about him and about myself. I gave Freddie reactions—when in reality he simply sat there and said nothing—because those were the reactions I needed him to be having, whether I knew that in the moment or only after hours of thought. I wanted to believe the reactions I'd attributed to him because they made me feel better about myself.

* * *

At the end of August Felicia and I moved out of the dorm and into a flat we would share with Krissy and Anna. I'd been responsible for picking the flat. Felicia would be returning home in March and felt she didn't deserve to have much say as she wouldn't be living there as long as the rest of us; Anna was in the States visiting her parents at the time, and Krissy wasn't planning to move in for another six months. As things turned out, Krissy moved in three months early, which meant Felicia and I would share a bed in the front room, which was also the lounge. On move in day Anna helped Felicia and me carry everything we owned across town. Freddie had said he would use his car to help us move, as I had helped clean and pack his dorm with him, but when the time came, he and his car were nowhere to be seen.

It was the beginning of the end with Freddie. I knew leaving the dorm would cause changes, and in the new semester he pulled away. I knew that getting busier with school would mean less time together, despite his saying he would need me more than ever, to get him through it.

Before moving out, we'd smoked cigarettes outside the back entrance to the dorm after getting our year-end results from the school. I was so upset and on a rant about getting a mediocre grade in one of my classes. I went on and on about how I shouldn't be upset because I'd told myself when I'd come to England that the goal was a social life, not just perfect grades, and that keeping my perfect undergraduate record going was secondary. But I was still upset.

Then Freddie said, "I failed my year."

That shut me up. He was starting over, but I didn't ask him much more about it. I don't know if I should have asked, should have tried to console him, but I'd had other

boyfriends that I wouldn't have dared to ask, so I didn't ask Freddie. That could have been the start of his finding someone who would ask.

The fact that Felicia and I shared a bed was also a hindrance to the budding intimacy I might have shared with Freddie. The beginning of my time with Freddie was also the start of a dalliance between Felicia and one of her co-workers from the restaurant, a slightly balding Frenchman named Vincent who moved around the restaurant like a greyhound chasing a rabbit—we called him Le Vincent.

"I keep telling him that I'm still with Doug," Felicia said, cooking Stephanie's recipe for spicy chilli meatballs.

"And what does he say?" Krissy asked. She was sipping wine and leaning against the counter.

"He says he knows that and that he's ok just being my friend," Felicia said.

"You can't buy that he's ok being just friends," I said.

"He's in love with you," Krissy said.

"Did you hear what he got her when they had just started talking at work?" I asked Krissy.

"Spit it out," she said.

"A copy of the original pilot episode of *The Big Bang Theory*."

"We're just friends," Felicia said.

"And Freddie and I were just friends," I said, taking the bottle of wine from Krissy and pouring myself a drink.

Having Le Vincent gave Felicia somewhere to go and someone to spend time with when I was with Freddie, but eventually Freddie had still had enough.

Felicia had booked a table at *The Ivy* in Covent Garden—a fancy, celebrity hangout that she had read about online—for her birthday. Krissy, Freddie, and I were meant to be there, but by the time we were all standing on the train platform Freddie still hadn't showed up. Only halfway into the city centre did he return my texts with a simple, "Not coming." Felicia was fuming. Krissy had her eyebrows raised as Felicia jabbed the numbers on her phone.

"Can you come to central, for my birthday dinner? We have an opening," Felicia said into the phone. Not ten minutes after we arrived at the restaurant, Le Vincent came through the door, unbuttoning his jacket and trying to stifle his heavy breathing.

Days later, Felicia and Le Vincent out for a drink, Freddie finally came back around and I asked.

"Honestly, I needed to feel like I could do what I wanted," he said.

"As if you don't get to do what you want all the time?"

"I feel like I'm dating both of you and that I'm not getting anything out of Felicia," he said. "I just needed to do my thing that night."

"Then maybe we should call this," I said.

"You go straight to breaking up?" he said.

"To be honest, this isn't the first time it's felt like you've blown me off. It feels like you don't care all that much anymore, and I've become some kind of glorified cheerleader for you."

"You're not a glorified cheerleader," he said.

"Then why does it feel like I'm always cheering you on and you pay me no attention? Where's my fucking cheerleader? I've been in the relationship where I'm not a priority and I don't matter."

"I don't want you to feel that way, but I don't want to break up," he said.

When Felicia walked into the house an hour later, Freddie and I were laying on the bed, leaning against the pillows. I've never seen rage in Felicia's eyes like I did that day, and never have again.

"She looks angry," Freddie said.

"She wanted me to break up with you," I said.

A week later, after almost no contact with Freddie, I was sitting in *O'Neill's Pub* with Krissy when Felicia and Vincent walked in. They slid into the booth across from us.

"We saw Freddie in *Bentalls*," Felicia said, referring to the big shopping centre on the high street. "He was with some blonde girl, had his arm around her as they went down the escalator. Had a sad look on his face when he saw me too."

"You called it," I said to Felicia. "Vincent, you're buying this round."

A week later, Felicia went into *McDonald's* in the bottom floor of *Bentalls* and I sat down on a bench outside to wait for her when I looked up and saw a pretty, familiar face. It was Freddie. He came over and stood in front of me.

"How are you?" he asked. Whether it was genuine concern, or curiosity about how much he'd meant to me, I didn't know.

"I'm fine. How are you?" I said with none of the concern and all of the casual acquaintance pep I could infuse into my words. "How's soccer, are you still going?" I asked. He said he had a match on Wednesday and then was going home for his mom's birthday. I mentioned going to the store for tobacco and that Coke was on sale.

"I guess I'll see you around," he said before slowly turning and walking away.

The last time he'd left my flat, after Freddie and I patched things up and Felicia had given me a death stare, Freddie had driven away wearing my University of South Carolina sweatpants and my Kingston University sweatshirt.

"I want them back, but I really don't want to see him again," I said to Felicia and Krissy as we sat down in the lounge with our *MacDonald's*. "And I still have his stupid book."

"We can get it for you," Felicia said, looking at me seriously.

Krissy's eyes lit up and she said, "Yea we can!"

"I can't send you guys to do my dirty work," I said.

"Of course, you can," Felicia said. "That's what friends do. He shouldn't get to see you again."

"I'm half relieved not to do it myself, because I feel really stupid, but I also feel a bit pitiful for not going," I said. I should have faced him and taken my things back myself. It was a confrontation that would have been good for my ego, in that I would have had to face the silly choices I'd made, to trust him in the first place, to want it to work more than I let on, to not have followed through after Felicia's birthday. My very first boyfriend, freshman year of college, became depressed and his eyes would drift to the side or down when he looked at me. I asked him if he wanted to stay together. He said, "You choose." I told him that wasn't fair. I told him if he didn't want to be there with me, I didn't want to be there with him. I got out of his car and walked away. Sitting on my bed, in my flat in Kingston, I asked Freddie if he wanted to break up. He said, "You choose." I even thought about that moment in the parking lot in South Carolina and yet I still made the wrong choice.

"This is going to be so much fun," Krissy said. At that moment the front door opened, and Anna came through. "Anna," Krissy said, "Don't take off your coat, we're going to get Sarah's stuff back from Freddie."

“Awesome,” Anna said. “Let me put this stuff in the kitchen and then I’m ready.”

“I’m going to get in the shower before you guys leave, so I can say I didn’t know you had gone,” I said. Krissy and Felicia were putting their shoes on, grabbing their coats. “Don’t forget to take the book,” I said.

They were gone when I finished my shower, Freddie’s book still sitting on the table. Upon return the girls reported deep sighs and pathetic attempts at folding to stall for time, puppy eyes and looks of disappointment. On the one hand I wish I could have seen for myself, but part of me relished denying him some attempt at redemption. He never came for his book, despite asking for it once many months later, and then, a year later I donated it to a used bookstore.

* * *

Felicia planned my twenty-fourth birthday without consulting me. The planning was her gift to me, and it was glorious. The year before I came to London, living with Mom and Dad, I had started practicing a method to reduce my anxiety; avoiding thoughts of the future. If it wasn’t happening today or tomorrow, I shouldn’t think too hard about it, it would only cause me worry. I would deal with things as they occurred instead. So that year, I slowly tackled, day by day, my reading and shopping lists, packing only in the last month, dealing with bigger things like visas and paperwork on the days that I couldn’t avoid them anymore. It helped. The year was a much more relaxed one, despite the fact my father was being treated for prostate cancer. I knew I would be leaving, but that day was far away and not to be considered when I had the day in front of me to get through. Unfortunately, ignoring the

long term has the effect of crippling one's ability to plan for the long term, and I was never keen to begin with.

Felicia, aside from wanting to ease my general anxiety, also wanted to break me of birthday anxiety and show me it was possible to enjoy the day, despite the pressure to enjoy it.

She told me the night before, "You'll need to wear something you're okay getting dirty in, but also something you're comfortable going out in later that night."

"And how are those two things going to come together in one outfit?" I asked.

That morning we boarded the train. I asked no questions. I was sceptical but knew Felicia had made real efforts for me and I could see the excitement on her face. She relished research and incidental learning, falling through the rabbit hole of the Internet and emerging out the other side with lists and maps and facts and places to visit and ways to get there. She travelled on her own and thrived. I said I didn't want to travel on my own because I liked having someone to turn to and marvel with, but in reality, I don't know if half the time I could logistically get myself anywhere once I dealt with the anxiety of attempting it. Felicia wanted to do that for me, she thought I was worth planning for, worth marvelling with.

Emerging from the tube station and on to street level, Felicia led me down a quiet road, her head swivelling in every direction, as though she wasn't sure where she was or what she was looking for. Then we stopped in front of a large wooden gate, pulled open to reveal a sawdust covered flagstone yard in front of a barn.

"We're going horseback riding!" Felicia said. "In Hyde Park!"

"You remembered?"

“Of course,” she said. “I know they were kids, but when we saw them in the park you got so excited.”

A woman came out of the barn and greeted us, asked us to sign waivers excusing them of injury or accident on our part, and asked us if we’d ever ridden before. Felicia had not.

“I still don’t understand how you are from Kentucky, land of the horse race, and have never ridden,” I said.

“I did pony rides as a kid,” she said. “It just wasn’t something we did.”

The woman fitted us with helmets and boots, and pinned a blue ribbon to my shirt, that said ‘Happy Birthday’ in block letters. She led us back to the yard where three horses were waiting. She put a small step down next to the large brown mare and held the horse still as I swung my leg over the horse’s back. The instructor then took the step to Felicia’s horse and helped Felicia clamber on. Because of her inexperience, the guide held a lead rope that was attached to Felicia’s horse’s bridle, so that he wouldn’t run away with her. My mare plodded along behind, and I watched Felicia, sitting uneasy, hands gripping the front of her English saddle as though she wished there were a pommel there. Her horse’s reins hung slack about his neck and occasionally Felicia would turn to look at me, a combination of panic and ecstasy on her face.

Riding through the park, so tended and manicured, reminded me of how different riding in North Carolina was. As kids, my brothers and I had lessons at a local summer camp that boarded horses over the winter. There were many trails through the woods behind the barn and when we were lucky our instructor would take us on trail rides, leaving the relative safety and predictability of the riding ring behind. One day in spring, I remember our instructor, Melissa, a slip of a woman with long wavy brown hair always pulled back in a

simple pony tail, pointing out the rare lady slippers, small blooms of pink and white poking up through the layer of leaves, pine straw, and broken twigs. I remember swaying side to side as my horse lumbered over tree roots and followed Melissa. I drifted off, forgetting I was not the only one in the woods and started to sing. I don't remember what the song was, but I remember Melissa looking back at me and smiling. I stopped singing, was embarrassed to realize I'd been signing aloud. I felt childish.

Now Felicia and I were being led around the outside of the park, on wide dirt tracks next to the pedestrian sidewalks. Someone, a tourist, stopped to take our photograph and then walked on. Children, one hand holding onto their mother's, the other pointing at the large beasts they longed to run up to and pet. The distance between our horses kept us from speaking freely, left us in silence as we slipped passed perfect flowerbeds and tried not to stare at the tourists staring at us. But being caught by the eyes of tourists was not the same as being caught by Melissa's gaze when I was singing in the woods. In the woods I was the spectacle because she knew me, expected one thing of me, and found herself facing another instead. In Hyde Park, I was spectacle adjacent. The tourists knew nothing except that I was on the back of a horse in a place they may not have expected to see a horse. The horse was the surprise, the thing that caused their expectations to shift. Felicia had given me spectacle adjacent, allowed me to feel the delight without the pressure.

"I see what you meant now," I said when we dismounted back at the barn, "about wearing clothes I wouldn't mind ruining. Not that that was a very dirty activity."

"But a dress would not have been appropriate," Felicia said.

She had the whole day planned. We received facials and manicures from students at a beauty school near Carnaby Street then wandered through the shops and up and down the lanes of Soho until it was time to head to *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese*, a pub on Fleet Street

once frequented by Samuel Johnson. Inside she told me to order drinks and then wandered away. My anxiety crept back up my spine, having abandoned me at the sight of the horses and at the reassuring sound of Felicia's voice as she led me through the day. With drinks in hand, I turned to look for her, afraid that my face would show the fear of being alone, looking beyond the people in front of me and trying not to make eye contact with anyone, afraid they would speak to me if I did. I didn't like to be rude, but it would be difficult to tell someone, "Look, coming to the bar with my friends causes me enough problems, let's not add meeting new people to the mix," without sounding rude.

Felicia came around a corner and waved me over. At the end of a long hallway we entered a room and there, at a long table on the far side, was a group of people I recognized. Krissy, Anna, Steve, even Le Vincent was there, snapping pictures as Felicia and I came into the room. At the end of the table, in front of an empty seat, was a cake made to look like an open book, a T.S. Eliot quote scrawled in icing, "Do I dare eat a peach?" A large marzipan peach sat on the right page.

"Le Vincent made the cake," Felicia cooed.

I was surprised to see them there, sitting together around the table, there for me. My eighteenth birthday had almost lost me some of my brand-new freshman friends at college, because I told them I didn't want to go to a strip club or get my belly button pierced. They were pissed at me for denying them the chance for fun. My birthday was their excuse to go crazy, what I wanted didn't matter. The cliché is that "Your presence is gift enough," and I felt that that night.

* * *

Thanksgiving brought with it the continued feeling of being surrounded by people. Felicia managed to get someone to cover her shift at the restaurant so she could wake up early and start cooking Thanksgiving dinner hours before anyone would arrive.

“I really want to try it, at least to be able to say I’ve cooked a turkey,” she said as she started laying out ingredients for what would be her first attempt at homemade biscuits. The year before, Anna and I had attended a Thanksgiving potluck dinner thrown by the school and sat with a hodgepodge of different friend groups. Felicia had eaten a frozen pizza in the dorm, and I have no idea what Krissy was doing that night. Starting with Felicia’s turkey, we—whoever was still living in the flat—would throw Thanksgiving dinner parties that eventually include as many as twenty people crammed into the flat.

“But you don’t have to make the entire meal from scratch,” I said.

“I’m not,” she said. “Anna is cooking the green bean casserole. And you’re going to help too, obviously.” Felicia had done her research, printed out the recipes she would use, and written out a cooking timeline the night before. The turkey had to be ordered in from a butcher’s in Regent Street—at the time it was difficult to find turkeys at all in November, though over the next five years even the smaller chain groceries carried frozen turkeys—and arrived with ankles as well as a few stray leg feathers that we attempted to pluck off to no avail.

Felicia cooked all day, occasionally allowing the rest of us to lend a hand with menial tasks like peeling potatoes or adding marshmallows to the yams—or helping scrape the burnt marshmallows off the yams and replacing them with a fresh layer. Anna was the only one with a dish all her own. If she could have, Felicia would have preferred to have no interference, so that she could say she rose to, and conquered, the challenge of Thanksgiving dinner. The meal was a success, though the biscuits were a bit yeasty.

* * *

“Yay, you’re home,” I said as Felicia came through the door. Since Thanksgiving, Felicia had taken a few extra shifts at the restaurant and it felt as though I hadn’t seen her in ages.

“Not for long,” she said, dropping her bag and kicking off her shoes. “I’m going back for the evening shift, they need a hostess.”

“I thought that young girl was the hostess,” I said.

“She called in sick so Liam asked if I could do it.” She pulled off her long-sleeved white shirt and hung it on the back of a chair then started rifling through our closet. “But I get to wear something nice at least. You know,” she paused and looked at me, “you could do this job. If you wanted, I could recommend you.”

“Me?” I said. The restaurant had begun to intimidate me, despite the fact that Krissy and Anna and I would occasionally eat there when Felicia was working. It was the fact that all the faceless waiters now had faces and that those faces knew Felicia, knew I was her friend. It made me feel as if I had something to live up to but had no idea when that had happened or what exactly the expectations were. “What does hostessing even entail?”

“Just sitting whoever comes in the door, taking bookings, it’s pretty straight forward. Think about it.”

“I will.” I didn’t want her to mention me to her boss just yet, as that would mean I couldn’t back out. The commitment would commence as soon as Felicia put herself on the line for me, and I wasn’t prepared to let her do that just yet.

I had worked at summer camps when I was a teenager. One was a weeklong day camp that I volunteered at for a few summers, and the other was for two weeks one summer at the overnight camp I attended as a kid. In college, close to graduation, I had contemplated working in a nearby clothing shop, at least part time, but my Dad had vetoed the idea. "You have your entire life to work," he said. So, I didn't. And not working had not bothered me, until now. I was twenty-four and all my friends had part time jobs as well as attending classes. Felicia worked in the restaurant, Krissy worked at an online travel agent, and Anna worked at an organic grocery delivery service. Krissy and Anna were both angling for promotions, working their part time jobs into careers, and Felicia was working to pay for the fun she would have until she moved back to the states.

There was an element of shame that propelled me to accept Felicia's offer, to walk into *Browns* with a newly typed CV (a phrase I had found confusing at first, surprised to be using a Latin phrase instead of the French *resume*). I knew the academics on that CV would say I was capable of learning and following through, but I hated that there was little proper work experience to include. I felt exposed as the overgrown teenager I was, dependent. I needed to face myself, to face the things that I had allowed to hold me back.

As kids it pissed my teenaged brother off when Dad would make him call and order the pizza, instead of making me do it. It drove Joseph mad when Mom ordered my food for me at a restaurant. "Why can't you just do it yourself?" he always asked. "Leave her alone," Mom would say, and then order my meal for me. My parents didn't help me get over my anxiety, the way Joseph would have preferred. "Just be happy," he would say, when he came into a room to find me crying to Mom about how depressed I was. Rather than pushing me out of my comfort zone, where I would be forced to face whatever it was that

was holding me back, Mom and Dad allowed me to hide away, held me when I cried, told me it would get better, but never necessarily pushed me to participate in my own growth.

Joseph was shocked when Mom told him I'd gone out and gotten a job. "On purpose? Why?" I didn't need to work, so he figured I wouldn't. He knows me as an avoider, not one to put myself into the world unless it was out of dire necessity. And though I didn't need the money, there was a sense of dire necessity. I felt behind, naive and inexperienced. I'd let my anxiety and depression become such a large part of who I was that even my brother couldn't recognize my actions as being my own. Taking the job at the restaurant was an attempt to put that part of me, the anxious depressed part, away, at least for a while, at least for a few hours during the weekend shifts. Walking from the flat to the restaurant, the anxiety would build, and I would spend the fifteen-minute walk telling myself that I should not be freaking out over what I did not know. I did not know how many bookings were already listed at the host point. I did not know how many tables would already be filled for breakfast, or how many people would walk through the door expecting me to seat them. It did not make sense to panic, until I saw if there was something to panic about. And if there was something that would create a sense of panic—where sweat started to prick my skin from my scalp to the bottoms of my feet—I would be surrounded by people who did not know that I took pills for my conditions, and the last thing I wanted was to break in front of them. The fear of that shame was enough to keep me together until the shift ended, and when it did, and the door of the restaurant swung shut behind me, I would be so proud of myself for surviving that the day would fall away. All the faces I had greeted, the mistakes I had made, the servers who'd been snippy with me during the rush, would all become well-earned work stories that I could share with the pride that I too had a shitty job

to contend with, that I too knew what it was like to be a part of the service industry, was capable of paying my dues and was not the child whose mother ordered for her.

Browns was family friendly but stylish with a slightly snobbish air of fine dining, despite the screaming children throwing peas on the floor. There were curving banquettes of dark brown leather sat next to the windows with round black tables dotting the floor, the long, gleaming brass bar ran down the right side, and there was live piano music on Sundays. After I'd told Felicia I would take the job, she took me to the restaurant to meet the manager. She led me up the stairs at the far end of the bar and through one of the elevated seating sections to the manager's office. When she knocked, a petite Asian woman with long jet-black hair opened the door.

"Sally, this is Sarah," Felicia said. We shook hands and I handed her my CV.

"How do you feel about serving?" Sally asked as she quickly surveyed the single page and then put it on the desk.

"I've never done it before," I said, "but I can always try."

"Well, we'll put you on the door to start but I might have you trained up and try to get you out onto the floor as well," she said, flipping over my CV and making notes on the back.

"Oh, ok then," I said, shooting Felicia a look. I hadn't expected to be shunted directly into a different job description, and though I may have been panicked to think of waiting on tables, I figured if everyone was watching me, I would have to suck it up and get out there.

"Can you come in in two weeks for a trial shift?" Sally asked.

"I'll be here."

"Great, wear all black and comfortable shoes," she said.

I was grateful for those two weeks. I needed them to prepare myself for spending hours not only interacting with people but with the idea that my job as hostess would directly affect how smoothly the restaurant ran. I would essentially be the first line of defence, the first face that the customer would encounter. I would start on a Friday night. It would be busy, and I would be thrown into the deep end.

Two weeks later I entered the building, dressed in black, but this time without Felicia. Initially, I thought she'd be working that night; there to help out, give me tips, or just basic reassurance from across the room. Not having her there that first night reminded me of my flight to London, the one I had decided to take without my mother. I'd be alone but I knew, ultimately, I was better off without her there. I would have to stand for myself. That was the point of the job after all. I had accepted the job because ultimately Felicia would leave the country, go home to Kentucky, and I would be without her. I wanted a way to ensure that when she left, I still had a life. In the year we had known each other, I had connected with Felicia, she'd become my best friend, but was also becoming a crutch. I preferred not to do things without her; felt lonely going around town by myself, missed her when she was away. I was becoming dependent on her, the way I'd become dependent on Neil in college. We had other friends, lived with Krissy and Anna, but Felicia and I shared a bed. She reminded me of my mother. But I had had to learn to do things without my mother and I would have to learn to do things without Felicia. I did not want her to leave, to fly home to the States, and leave me in London with nothing. The same way I had come to London to gain a life, I had to make sure that I didn't come to rely on Felicia the way I had relied on Neil and my mother to create that life for me. Otherwise, when she left, I would have to start all over again.

As I entered the building, an Eastern European girl with dark hair piled high on top of her head greeted me. Her breasts were large and attempting to escape from her black top as she moved.

“Is Sally here,” I asked her. “I have a trial shift tonight.”

“I’m not sure,” she said, looking around her with a confused expression. “It’s my first day.”

“I’ll just go see if I can find her,” I said.

The office door was open, and Sally was sitting at a computer when I knocked. She looked at me slightly confused as well.

“Sally? I’m Sarah, you told me to come in for a trial shift?”

“Oh, right,” she said. “Sorry, I forgot. You can leave your stuff here.” She took me back to the front doors and the host point.

“This is Farough,” Sally said, “she’s also trialling. Our regular hostess called in sick. She was supposed to be here to train you. It’s pretty straightforward though.” She showed us the restaurant’s floor plan, laminated and taped to the top of the host point, each little numbered circle representing a table.

“This is the list of bookings we have tonight, so you’ll have to give them all tables, write it down here, and you can cross them off on the floor plan to help you keep track if you want, or obviously you can look around to see what’s open and what’s not, it’s not a very big place.” She walked us through the restaurant, pointing out the different sections that would be covered by individual servers, introduced us to the kitchen staff through the open window to the kitchen. Then the guests started to come through the door.

“Ok, I’m off,” Sally said, “Liam, our general manager will be here if you need anything, and Archie is behind the bar.” And that was our training. My heart was racing. Part

of me was resentful—probably as a way to shift focus from the fear—of Sally forgetting to make a note of my trial and for the hasty training session, but after Sally’s hasty departure there was no more time to think.

As I was explaining to Farough that each circle on the floor plan represented one table—and that she only needed to mark off one circle instead of four each time she sat a table of four people—Liam the manager walked up. He held out his hand and it was all I could do to keep my mouth from dropping open. Felicia had said he was attractive, that he looked like David Beckham, but I hadn’t seen him for myself. If I had I might have been too self-conscious to take the job.

“You are the first face they see when they come through that door,” Liam said, smoothing down his pink tie. “Greet them, welcome them, and smile. I’ll be here, but you’ll do fine.”

As he walked away, Farough and I looked at each other and smiled. Farough appeared as if she had come to the restaurant as a guest, rather than as a hostess. She was in all black, as required, but looked more appropriately dressed for a nightclub than for work. I’d been told to wear flats that night and had no idea how Farough was going to cope in the five-inch heels she was wearing. Her eyes were heavy with eyeliner and her lips were lined bright pink beyond their natural border. It took time to notice the large black flower clipped to the back of her hair. She would soon be out of the British version of high school and would turn twenty on New Year’s Eve.

“I had a trial at Benetton’s yesterday,” she said, “but this seems like it would be more fun, rather than just folding clothes all day.” I had the feeling I would be good at folding clothing all day. I was happy to have her with me, to have someone to share my ignorance with. When the phone rang, I asked if she wanted to answer it.

“You do it,” she said, panic in her voice. As the guests filed through the door, she pushed me forward to greet them, but when I’d asked how many in the party, Farough jumped to grab the menus, cutting me off to lead them through to their table. I began to suspect that she didn’t want to stand at the front alone and perhaps it was her hesitancy that made me feel more capable. There had been other moments in my life when other people’s embarrassment or hesitancy has caused me to step forward, being brave as a way to save someone else’s dignity, like when I wore the ugly life jacket so my friend wouldn’t feel stupid in front of her crush when jet skiing at my cousin’s house. I find it easier to step forward for the sake of someone other than myself.

During a slight lull we were introduced to Archie, the young Russian bar manager. Dressed in a black shirt with small white polka dots, rather than the bar tender’s black shirt and apron, Archie strutted up to the host point, legs bowed and face scowling, a mole on his upper lip. He spoke with a Russian accent telling us, “If you aren’t busy you should be cleaning, picking up glasses from the bar and taking them to the glass wash.” He picked an empty pint glass off a nearby table and started to walk away. “Come!” he said, looking back at us, expecting direct obedience as he showed us where to take the dirty glassware. He ended up being full of controversial advice when it came to the guests. “Just lie! Tell them no you can’t sit there, that table is booked—even if it’s not.” Or, “Just play the game and pretend that that table was always their table and you knew they were coming.” “Don’t promise anything! You promise them something and they don’t get it and then the whining, and it’s on us, it’s our fault.” Despite working in the service industry, he hated the guests; they were there solely to piss him off.

Two hours into the shift Farough came back to the host point with her coat on and her bag slung over her shoulder.

“They told me I could go home.” We had just been talking about how all the new stimulation was tiring and that standing all night would leave us with tired feet. Felicia had figured the shift would last until ten that night and it was only eight-thirty.

“Did they tell you when to come in next?” I asked.

“Liam said he would call me,” she said.

As Farough exited, Liam came up and leaned against the host point.

“So, I told Farough she could go,” he said. “How do you feel about hanging round for a bit longer?”

“I should be fine,” I said. “I can try at least.”

“Have you considered serving?” he asked.

“I would say I’m a little more nervous about serving, as I’ve never done it.”

“Well you’ve done a great job tonight, and I am happy to offer you the job. I could and would like to see you serving, I think you’d be good at it.” I thought about how most of the satisfaction from this job would come from talking about it after the fact.

I spent the rest of the night on my own, asking Liam questions whenever I could think of one to ask, if only to interact with him. When I asked if I could bus some of the empty tables, despite it being the servers’ responsibility, he smiled and showed me where the disinfectant was. At the end of the night, I gathered my things from the office and Liam told me to come in the next week, for a Sunday lunch shift. I hadn’t fucked it up. I started home to replay the night with Felicia.

* * *

Sunday morning the restaurant was practically empty when I walked in. Archie greeted me from behind the bar then promptly told me to start wiping down the menus. As I stood at the host point with my rag and disinfectant a server, dressed in his long-sleeved white button-down shirt, green striped tie, and long white apron rounded the corner in front of me.

“Hi, I’m Rich,” he said, sticking his hand out.

“I’m Sarah,” I said, shaking his hand. “You’re the first one who’s actually introduced themselves.” He was tall and lean and walked with a bounce when he approached.

“I just wanted to come say hello, see how you were getting on.”

“So far, so good,” I said.

“So, you’re American?”

“That I am.”

“Where in America?”

“North Carolina, South Carolina,” I said. “I consider them both home.”

“What brings you here?”

“Going to school, at Kingston Uni.” (Krissy answered this persistent question by saying, “The food and the weather, of course!” I was never quick enough to be so quippy on the spot.)

“Oh, how old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-four,” I said. I wasn’t sure why guys had been asking me that, though I was always curious to know new people’s ages, if only so I could compare life stages. “And you?”

“Twenty-three,” he said. “No, I’m actually twenty-two, I shouldn’t start on a lie.”

Sally, who must have come in from the back entrance, suddenly appeared on the raised section behind the bar, leaning against the railing. "Sarah, come up here, we need to do your paper work."

Sitting at a table for six next to the office was another newbie, a large guy with curly black hair, who appeared slightly choked by his tie. Sally sat next to him with papers spread out before them.

"This is Lucas, he's new too," she said, passing papers and a pen towards me. Rich had followed and slid into the booth on the other side of the table.

"Where are you from?" I asked Lucas.

He laughed, "That, my new friend, is a very long and complicated story. I count South America, Dubai and England on my list though." Lucas was one of many ethnic enigmas working in *Browns*. He sounded American but could speak multiple languages and had lived in more countries than I had lived in States. There was also Piers, English by birth but raised in the States since he was young and was the picture of a delinquent Californian youth decked out in Dickies and Adidas trainers, always wearing a hoodie. He annoyed Felicia because after he was hired, she no longer felt like the novelty American even if she technically was.

"What are you doing?" Sally asked, looking at Rich.

"Getting to know the new staff," he said.

"You should be working," Sally said.

"Is your real name Sally," I asked, "or is it Sarah?"

"It's really Sally," she said.

"Why would you ask that?" Rich said.

"Sally is a nickname for Sarah, though I've never understood why."

“I’m going to have to call you Sally now,” he said.

“Is the other hostess going to be here today,” I asked Sally, wondering if I would have anyone to help me, or possibly continue my training.

“She should be here by now, so I guess she’s not coming,” Sally said. I would be on my own again, though Felicia would be there in a few hours.

Waiting for the rush to start, Archie made me a coffee and I stood drinking it, watching the door for incoming guests. I listened as Rich and Archie exchanged banter and ranted about one of the regular Sunday morning guests. As I stood, leaning against one of the taller bar tables, Rich turned around and looked at me.

“Hey, if you’ve got time to lean,” he said, raising his eyebrow at me, “you’ve got time to clean.” And clean was the majority of what I did. Clearing tables, wiping them off, and then resetting them was the preferred task, as it kept me busy. Doing those things for the servers would earn me the occasional tip at the end of the shift. Lucas made a deal with me his first day. “You help me clean and I’ll start the shift by giving you five pounds.” Cleaning was more in line with my slight OCD tendencies, helped relieve some of the anxiety between interactions with the guests. If my hands and feet were moving, I had less time to acknowledge the anxiety.

* * *

Felicia followed me into the glass wash and made sure the door closed behind us.

“I told Rich he should come over tonight,” she said, keeping her hand on the door and watching me empty the glasses I had on my tray and put them in the plastic wash racks.

“That sounds good,” I said, focusing on the glassware.

“He said he wasn’t going to come over until you invited him,” she sneered.

“He said that?” I asked, turning to look at her.

“He’s good,” she laughed, “the ball’s in your court.”

Felicia finished her shift early and said she would see me at home. I still had to light the candles and reserve tables for the night shift. I wandered around the restaurant collecting the red glass globes from each of the tables and lining them up next to the till in the raised section that overlooked the restaurant floor—it was also a gathering place for the servers as it was close to the back entrance of the kitchen as well as the bar. Rich and another server—Sam, a woman with very curly blonde hair who was deaf in one ear—were leaning next to the till chatting as I lined up the candleholders.

“Does one of you have a lighter I can borrow?” I asked them, taking tea lights out of a cardboard box.

“Here you go,” Sam said, “But I want it back.” Lighters were a hot commodity among the servers, always being ‘accidentally’ pocketed.

As I lit the candles, Rich occasionally took a lit globe and placed it in the centre of a table, as long as the table wasn’t too far away.

“I just got this new phone,” he said to Sam.

“Oh yea, which one?” Sam asked.

“It’s some Samsung thing, I haven’t worked it out yet,” he said pulling the phone out and handing it to Sam.

“What’s to work out?” Sam said.

“Like this,” he said, taking the phone back, “I can’t figure out how to save a number. I’ll give it a try.” He turned to me, lighter in my hand. “What’s yours?”

I couldn't help but laugh. I gave him my number. I told him he should come over when his shift ended.

Felicia and I talked about my behaviour after Rich left our flat that night, having hung out for a few hours after his evening shift.

"You were so much more animated, livelier," she said. "For God's sake you jumped on the bed telling that story. I don't think I ever saw you so animated around Freddie." I hadn't been worried about projecting or protecting an image. I curated myself around Freddie, in a way that was familiar to me. I had an idea of who I wanted to be with Freddie, most likely based on how I thought he perceived me. With Neil I had done this to the point of losing myself. As Felicia pointed out, whatever I was or wasn't projecting to Rich, I was much less self-conscious than I had been around Freddie. Perhaps it was because Rich put on less of a show; he didn't have his chest sticking out of his shirt, or his shoulders thrown back to make himself look bigger, he didn't look at me and see a free ride or a groupie. I had already proved myself a capable human being during the shifts we shared at the restaurant, which took off the pressure of trying to prove something to him had we gone straight to dating.

* * *

Krissy went home again for Christmas our second year. Anna spent the actual holidays with her grandmother in Plymouth but for a while it was the three of us basking in the twinkle lights spread all over town. We drank mulled wine at Winter Wonderland in Hyde Park, dancing to loud German music pumping from the huge wooden stage as steam rose from the jostling crowd. We bought a small plastic tree from Wilkinson's (basically a K-mart) and

decorated it with miniature ornaments as well as the small collection of ornaments Felicia had been accumulating as souvenirs. We hoped for snow, like the year before, but were rewarded with only wind and cold, so on the nights Felicia wasn't at the restaurant we bundled up in blankets and watched Christmas movies on our laptops.

It was my first Christmas away from home, let alone abroad. It was probably the combination of the two that made that Christmas, though technically a bit boring with a lot of hanging out, more special. It wasn't that anything of real importance happened but the fact that we had somewhere else to be, somewhere other than home; that we had a choice, and a damn good option if we didn't want to go home. Krissy wanted to go home, she would go home every year, and I couldn't hold that against her. I valued the time I did spend at home, because ultimately, when anyone would ask what I missed most about home when living abroad, the answer was always my family. But it felt good to have a choice. Staying in Kingston felt like an acknowledgement that my life in England continued, whereas going home for Christmas would have made it feel false again, like something I could take a break from, a book I put down, a story that would stop if I weren't there. And I didn't want it to stop. I wanted to be there when it kept moving forward. Going home felt like opting out.

* * *

Graduation for the master's program took place in January, three months after the start of my second year. (The year after me, the school would make the MFA program a single program, rather than having the MFA being a second-year addition to the master's program.) The day felt out of time, too far after the end of our program, too far into the next steps, that the ceremoniousness of the day appeared ridiculous. Graduation robes, at

the best of times, are nothing more than hospital gowns in various colours, meant to signify the passage from one place to the next, the same with the crossing of the stage. The diploma is nothing more than a receipt of time and money spent, and the point of the day was taking a photo to mark the day as an ending, or a beginning, however one chooses to view it.

Anna was a part of the morning ceremony as she was graduating from the music program, so we met her after she walked and before she handed in her graduation cap and gown. Felicia and I picked up our rented gowns and found Anna in the gardens of All Saints Church off the marketplace to take pictures of each other for the benefit of the parents that would not be in attendance.

This graduation wasn't worth attending, in that our parents had already witnessed our local undergraduate graduations and since Felicia and I were both carrying on, there would be other opportunities that might be deemed worth the airfare. My parents, as well as Neil and his parents, had attended my undergraduate ceremony at the basketball stadium in South Carolina. Neil told me at the time that his mother had been telling all her friends that I'd made summa cum laude. I remember reading down through the program of all the other graduates as I sat waiting amongst my peers to walk across the makeshift stage. The sea of black caps and gowns took up the entire floor of the basketball court as well as the entire back section of the bleachers. None of my friends from freshman year had made summa cum laude, but I wondered what their lives had looked like over the past two years. I met my parents outside and we snapped some photos before Neil rushed us all off to the cars so we could get back to the house for a family BBQ. At home my brothers showed up and Neil puffed his chest out to greet them then spent the rest of the afternoon talking about what his graduation would be like the next year.

Despite my pleading, Felicia still planned to leave in March, however, she was going to continue to be a student of Kingston University. She decided to pursue a doctorate in creative writing, but she would return home to Kentucky and do her PhD as an international student. We were now two sides of the coin—crossing borders to study and studying across borders—instead of the same.

While I did homework for classes and worked on the visa renewal application for my second year, Felicia did research for her doctoral proposal. I shuffled papers, collected bank statements and answered hundreds of questions on the visa application while she appeared to soar through her new research project. I was pleased for her but had to continue to hide my jealousy. She had won a weeklong writing retreat in Italy as well as landing a prestigious editor as her MA dissertation advisor. She was racing through huge critical theory collections and talking about the argument she wanted to make about regional literature, particularly Southern literature, and how so and so said this, while so and so refuted his claims, and on and on. It felt as though she had outpaced me in the space of a week. Her eyes glassed over, and she tripped over her words speaking so quickly, the way she had spoken about her fantasy novel. She could see her entire argument forming from all sides in her head, the way the plot of her novel had come to her. I worried that she was seeing her future coming together and that we were no longer just two girls playing around at being adults while studying, but that she was actually growing up and making plans.

I had thought, when I signed up for the MFA in Kingston, that two years was a long time. It wasn't so long that I couldn't survive being away from home, or being with annoying people, or not enjoying my work, because two years would eventually come to an end. I also didn't believe my Dad when he said, "Yesterday I was only sixteen." My sense of time had become distorted. Felicia and I both had visas for eighteen months. I was renewing mine

while she was riding hers out until the end. Technically, I would only have another six or seven months without her before I finished the course. It felt as though I was facing the prospect of being alone for an eternity, while at the same time realizing how fast the first eighteen months had gone by. My time in England was almost over actually, and once again, I hadn't made any real plans. I had taken a job at the restaurant, but that was essentially to get me through to the end of the two years, to get me through the period of time when Felicia was not there and before I could retreat home as well.

Except Felicia wasn't retreating. She was packing up and gearing up for war. She was ready to go home and continue to keep moving forward the way she had done in London. She wasn't going back. She was going to Kentucky, but she wasn't going back. We had joked that while she was in London, Felicia had undergone an *Ugly Betty* transformation. She had shed her old, suburban, backwoods connotations—purchased shirts that fit instead of showing her stomach, wearing pencil skirts instead of miniskirts—and allowed her new surroundings, her new city to shape her in its image. Betty had gone from the Bronx to Manhattan, but in the end, Betty completed her transformation by moving to London, taking everything she had learned in the course of her transformation and putting it to use in a new place. Felicia had a slightly harder task than Betty, to take her new big city self into the small-town life, but by the way Felicia enjoyed wearing her knee-high grey leather boots for twelve hours a day, even in the house, I didn't expect her go gently back into a belly shirt.

* * *

In early February, Liam gathered the servers for the pre-shift meeting, some already wearing their ironed white shirts, others still in their street clothes waiting to be dismissed in order to get to the staff room iron first. Liam went through the day's specials, reiterated his preferred method for laying the tables, and announced that there would be no more free sodas from behind the bar.

"Also," he said, "Sadly, Felicia will be leaving us next month." I looked up and across the room to see Rich staring back at me. We had gone for a drink the week before, managed to go to four different bars as the night grew darker, each bar closing and forcing us to find another that would allow us to extend our time together. Dancing in *Bacchus*, the small, underground club, we'd bumped into one of the bar tenders, who'd given us both a head nod and a big smile. The next date consisted of dinner and a walk along the river where we ran into another of the servers. And the third night we'd seen Lucas sitting at the bar of a pub called *The Acorn*. It had been impossible to avoid everyone finding out, as they all ended up being witness to our courtship whether we liked it or not.

"I understand that you and Felicia are close," Rich had said. "I don't want to get in the way of that, as I know she's leaving soon. But when she leaves, I'll be here."

* * *

Two weeks before Felicia flew back to the States, I had a phone call from my Mother. My grandmother had finally passed away. She had started showing minor symptoms of Alzheimer's before my grandfather died, five years before. He used to point things out to her when she'd forgotten something.

"That's not what you said last week, Mama," he'd say.

“Shut up, Willy,” she’d bark, “that’s exactly what I said.” When Papa died and she was left alone, Nanny’s symptoms became more persistent. Mom and Dad happened to be visiting when she left a cardboard pizza box on the stove, and the stove was on. That’s when they decided it was no longer safe for Nanny to live alone. Mom and her two siblings started taking two-week shifts living with and caring for their mother. I hadn’t seen Nanny since I moved to London. There hadn’t been time when I went home for Christmas. And now she was dead, and I wasn’t able to go to the funeral. My passport was with border control. I could not get it back unless I wanted to cancel my visa application.

I had a shift at the restaurant that day. I went in because I was afraid of staying home alone and having too much time to think about Nanny’s death and the fact that I had missed it. I could hear my cousin Marie’s voice talking about when she missed her grandfather’s funeral; she had been traveling around Europe when her grandfather died, and she hadn’t been told until she came home. She had missed the funeral because her parents had not given her the chance, had wanted to save her the grief, allow her to enjoy the trip she was taking. Marie told me later that she felt as if she hadn’t been allowed the closure offered by attending his funeral. She didn’t think I should miss Nanny’s. My parents, both faces vying for room on the computer screen, told me not to worry about coming home for the funeral. Aside from the visa complication, I did not need to be there. But I was disappointed that I did not have the option.

It didn’t bother me that Nanny was dead. I loved her, and would certainly miss her, but she’d been gone for a long time already. Her death was a relief for many reasons and for many people. I had had my time with her. I had said my goodbyes. And yet the entire time I had been in London I had been focused on my grandmother. I had been writing about that year off, about breaking up with my boyfriend, moving home, and helping Mom take care of

Nanny. I had tried to show the weight of responsibility that my mother and her siblings carried, as well as the humour they managed to keep throughout the entire ordeal. I wrote about going through all of my grandfather's old slides and film negatives, scanning familiar and unfamiliar family faces onto the computer for months; about Mom's stealth cleaning of Nanny's house, trying to de-clutter and clean before Nanny died so it wouldn't take quite so long after. I tried to show that even when Nanny fell out of her hospital bed, and Mom lifted her back in saying, "Were you trying to go to the fucking bathroom?" that it was said with love and a strong sense of devotion—which was reflected in Mom's patience when she allowed Nanny to sit on the toilet for fifteen minutes trying to pee. The point was the love and recognition that we—as three generations of women—gave to each other throughout—that even though Nanny didn't know who I was at all times, she recognized my breasts when I wore a bikini, told me, "We had someone here all summer with boobs like that, laying in the yard." Whether she was there or not, Mom cared for her, and Nanny continued to love her children and grandchildren, even when she complained about Mom to her face, thinking she was her other daughter.

My older brother, Joseph, had visited Nanny a few times during her convalescence, staying the night and hanging out with Mom and me. Our younger brother, Andrew, had not seen Nanny in years, since before she fell ill. I think Andrew kept his distance because it was too much for him. He had enough going on in his life to make decent excuses for not coming to visit, but I know, even though she understood, it hurt Mom that Andrew hadn't come. I saw everything my mother was doing for her mother, and all I could think about was the day those things would need to be done for my mother. She, my mother, was the reason I really wanted to attend the funeral. (There was also the chance of funeral hilarity I might miss.

Nanny herself had been notorious in her last years for saying inappropriate things at funerals, the favourite being when she asked the widow, “Who’s the old fart in the coffin?”) Wanting to see Nanny for the last time was a given because she was my only grandmother; my father’s mother had died years before he met my Mom. I’d only met Nanny when I was ten or so, after she and my mother had decided to not speak about the past and simply start again. Mom had failed Nanny with her first divorce, and I don’t know what Nanny’s reaction was to her second divorce, but when Mom suggested the family seek counselling to resolve an issue, Nanny had responded with “There’s the door, don’t let it hit you on the way out.” Then, one day Mom answered the phone and it was Nanny saying she had received the genealogy information Mom had sent her. She wanted to know where Mom had managed to find the marriage certificate they’d both been searching for. There was no mention of the ten years of silence.

I wanted to be there, in the tiny Catholic Church down the road from Nanny and Papa’s house, so that I could stand next to my mother. Despite everything—the years of silence, the disapproval and disappointment, the failed expectations and having to entirely overhaul the image of the woman who raised her—my mother kept going. She took care of herself, did what she had to do despite not having the support of her family—something I cannot imagine—and was still big enough to reach out and move forward, to continue to love and care for the parents that had not always been there for her.

I wanted to be there for Mom because I wasn’t sure when it would hit her. The death had simply been another thing Mom had to take care of, had to administrate. She had been carrying so much responsibility when it came to her mother that I was afraid that after the funeral, when it was done and there was no one that needed her constant attention and

help, that she would crumble. She'd kept herself busy, had said—during it all—that Nanny's death would be a relief, but when it did hit her, I wanted to be with her.

And it also felt as if I was going to miss the last instalment of Nanny's story. I'd spent my year off taking notes about what was going on around her, looking at the photographs of her and her parents, her children, that her husband had taken throughout the years, seeing the way the world was changing based on the height of the kids and the cut of her clothes, the way she styled her hair and how big the frames of her glasses became around her eyes. I'd seen her deteriorate in front of me, seen her ridiculous first attempts with her new walker—when she simply picked the whole thing up and started carrying it out in front of her instead of leaning on it—I'd seen her fall out of bed and have to be taken to the hospital. I'd heard her telling the nurses that she was cold, even under multiple blankets, heard my mother telling the nurses that Nanny used to be a nurse, had worked for years serving the community from the small local hospital that used to have separate entrances for blacks and whites. Her funeral felt like the last instalment, the last moments in which Nanny would physically be a part of our lives and not just those stories and memories. Putting her in the ground felt like the period at the end of her sentence, the last scene of her show. And it ended up being the last moment Nanny would impart laughter to her children.

Mom Skyped me when the funeral was over. Marie, the cousin who'd missed her grandfather's funeral, walked up to Nanny's coffin at the front of the church. She leaned over and kissed Nanny on the forehead and then made her way back to the family in the pews. She leaned towards my mother and her mother, my Aunt Fran, and said, "Is it just me, or did Nanny look a little funny?" Mom and Aunt Fran started laughing, hardly trying to stifle it. Marie was the most straight laced of us all, straight-A honour student who collected

achievements and accolades as if they would save her from Hell, and the fact that she had been the one to point out the ridiculousness of our grandmother's appearance at Nanny's funeral was almost as shocking as Nanny's appearance. Uncle Bill wanted to know what was so funny. The funeral director had had Nanny's hair and makeup done, only Nanny had never been a makeup person and was not one to sport her hair piled on top of her head as most Southern women do when they reach a certain age. The director asked Mom if there was anything he could do to make it better, to make Nanny appear more like herself. "You'd have to take her hair down and comb it around her face. The more witch-like the better, honestly. And take out her teeth." Marie's comment was a reminder that had Nanny been alive, she would have been the one making inappropriate comments. I was jealous Marie had been there, had sparked laughter and brought comfort. I wanted to be that person, but I had no passport.

Nanny's death was an obvious example of all the important events I would be likely to miss by virtue of living abroad. If it wasn't a passport, it was expensive flights and the time it would take to get across an ocean. If it wasn't the death of my grandmother, it was the death of my cat and a grieving father I could not comfort. If it weren't a death, it would be the birth of my brother's children. I was doomed to be a step behind my family, the one who would have to catch up later and meet people when they were already six months old. The distance from home wasn't often an issue—as I had expected it to be at sixteen—since Skype had been invented, allowing free video chat across the world. I could see my parents any time; I just couldn't get to them without an interval of at least twelve hours. I hadn't needed them to come to me when I'd be assaulted, but what if they needed me, or my brothers needed me? They told me it was ok to miss Nanny's funeral, she was dead so she wouldn't miss me. But I couldn't stop replaying the stories Mom told me later, when she

called the day after. I felt like someone reading the story after it was over, instead of living it as it took place. I kept replaying Mom's words in my head, her descriptions of the day, trying to find a way to insert myself into my family's plot, because it didn't feel like my plot anymore.

* * *

In the middle of March, Felicia brought out every piece of clothing from the closet, the shelves, the corner in the bathroom where she stacked her work clothes, and the jackets hanging on the back of the chair and thrown them in a giant pile on the bed. She was packing for the move home.

"First you should pick out what you are going to need in New York," I told her. "I would pack those in your backpack, just in case your suitcase gets lost." She'd booked a few days in Manhattan as a transition, before heading back to Kentucky. She would leave London as if she were only going away for the weekend.

"Thank you for helping me do this," she said. "I don't know how I'm going to get all this shit home."

"You're not," I said. "I'm going to force you to throw half of it away."

"No!" She moaned.

"Yes! You are not taking anything with a hole in it home with you. That includes those ripped rubber ducky boxer shorts."

"But they're so comfy and I sleep in them and they remind me of Doug!"

"And he slept with someone else and you broke up with him! Besides, they have more holes in them than they do intact fabric."

“What about these,” Felicia asked, pointing to a pile of t-shirts on the bed.

“Those are most certainly not going home with you.”

“But why not?”

“Because you wore them when you came here, and you’ve changed since you’ve been here,” I said. “You’ve worked hard to update your style, you can’t take your old stuff back home. They don’t even fit you!”

“I could lose a couple pounds.”

“Even if you did, they would still show your belly, and that’s not the point and you know it.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “I have had them since high school.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Now hand me those socks so I can stuff them in your shoes.”

I had packed for myself more times than I can count, since I was six and moving back and forth to Florida from North Carolina with my family, moving our lives from place to place, but always together. Now I was packing to send someone away. I wondered how my mother felt, packing me to leave the country.

“Are you ready to head out?” Felicia asked. “Everyone’s meeting at *The Ram* soon.” She’d rounded up all our work friends for leaving drinks. “You think Vincent will be there?”

“Of course, Vincent will there,” I said, pulling my jacket on. “He would hate himself if he didn’t say goodbye to you, no matter what happened between you.”

“I just don’t want him to hate me.”

“He’s going to hate you, Felicia,” I said opening the front door. “He’s in love with you, of course he’s going to hate you for not loving him back.”

“I tried to tell him,” she said, pulling the door closed behind her.

“I know, but with guys like him, you can’t still be friends. It only makes it worse.”

“I just wanted...” she trailed off.

“I know.”

The thing about going out with work people is that I tend only to remember bits and pieces. The conversation has faded and all that really remains are the faces, the people who sat around me, the atmosphere of the pub, the dim lights, the dark wood, the soft scratched leather of the booths. Sitting in my corner, I watched. Someone had brought a fake blond moustache and Nick Sick wore it for a while over his own stiff black moustache until it fell off and landed in his beer. When Vincent arrived, slipping through the back entrance, he kept his distance from Felicia, gripping a beer and talking quietly in his French accent a few yards away. Lucas, loud and boisterous, was talking about his favourite cooking show, where they made everything out of bacon. The Hungarian kept making kissy faces and every so often half the group would exit out the back and pass around a lighter. Sally arrived at one such moment, after her closing shift.

“Hey Sally!” Lucas yelled. “Say, me soy Sally!”

“No,” Sally said. “I’m not saying that.”

“Please say it!!!” Lucas begged.

“Me soy Sally,” Sally said, and everyone laughed. “You know I’m not Spanish right?”

She shook her head and left the laughing group behind as she went into the pub.

Back inside, Felicia was sitting on Ryan the bartender’s lap, laughing at Nick as he cracked jokes. In my mind the sound faded. People were talking, their lips were moving, the music stopped, and Vincent drew back his arm, his elbow coming up behind his shoulder. The sound returned when he pushed his fist forward again and there was a tinkling of glass. Heads snapped around and a bartender came out from behind the wall. Vincent was suddenly at the front door and there was another crunch. He was gone and there was a

large crack in one of the panels of glass in the front door, lines rippling out from the circle of a fist mark.

Nick spoke to the bartender and the manager while the rest of us moved outside. The pavement was spotted with blood, a trail that led up the street, pooling more heavily, the drops more numerous as they reached *The Rose Theatre* a few doors down. The spots appeared to double back, and Vincent was standing on the street talking to the authorities. The cop car became overlaid in my memory with an ambulance and someone was looking at his hand.

Lucas took Felicia by the shoulders, walked her up the street, me trailing behind. "Don't go back," he said to her. "It won't help him."

Somehow everyone already knew why Vincent had punched the glass. I couldn't hear them saying it, but by the sounds of the voices and the turning of the heads, Felicia and Vincent's tryst had not been as secret as Felicia would have liked. The group moved away in pairs and threes until *The Ram* and Vincent were behind a corner and the glowing sign above *Bacchus* came into view.

Following the stairs down into the darkness, heat rose from the cave-like club and we shed our outer layers. More drinks were pressed into our hands and the thump of the music made hearing anything else nearly impossible. *I'm going to the bathroom*, I mouthed to Felicia. In the stall I pulled a pen from my bag and added Felicia's and my name to the already named walls. When I returned Lucas was handing out Jager bombs. Felicia asked me to hold her blazer. I looped it over my bag along with my own jacket before attempting to down the shot without it coming back up. And then we were following the crowd down the high street. There was more loud music. *Barcadia*, a small bar near the train station.

Another smoking section.

“Where’s my jacket?” Felicia asked.

“I thought I gave it back to you.”

Panic immediately overwhelmed, crashing like a tidal wave as it can only do after a flood of Jägermeister and Red Bull. Then came the tears.

“We have to find it!” Felicia said, her eyes widening.

“We will find it, I swear.” I took her arm and we left the bar, Sally following us onto the street.

“Where are you guys going?” Sally asked.

“I lost Felicia’s jacket,” I said. “We’re going back to *Bacchus* to look for it.” Sally jogged to catch up with us, taking Felicia’s other arm.

Back in front of *Barcadia*, empty-handed, Felicia sat on the short brick wall that separated the sidewalk from the street.

“You know it’s not about the jacket, don’t you?” Sally asked me.

“Of course, I know it’s not about the jacket!” I said. “But it was a really good jacket. The perfect jacket. Do you know how long it took to find that jacket? It was her signature piece!” The jacket had jumpstarted her *Ugly Betty* transformation; black with brown elbow patches that steered her towards her professional academic attire.

Through the tinted glass of *Barcadia*’s windows I could see the silhouettes of dancers, oblivious to the scene taking place on the sidewalk outside. I thought about all the stories Felicia had told me, the nights she had had in the bar with our *Browns*’ colleagues, before I’d joined the team. I thought of the time me, the girls, and Freddie had done tequila shots there before going to dance the rest of the night away in the super club, *Oceana*, across the street. I’d seen plenty of girls, drunk crying on the street in the middle of a night

out. Sally's long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, but the night's revelries had left pieces hanging about her face as she sat next to me. She patted my back and let me sob.

Felicia was pacing, her high-pitched voice repeating like a mantra, "My jacket, I can't believe it's gone. My jacket..." *Subway* was still lit up next door, the big front windows with their stick-on advertisements for meatball subs shining like a beacon to the drunks stumbling out of *Oceana*. Girls with skirts riding up to show their butt cheeks, teetering through the doors on high wobbly heels, boys with pants slung below their asses following them like slobbering donkeys after a carrot. Some walked past, holding each other up, barely sparing a glance for the consequences of someone else's drunken mistakes.

Piers, large and redheaded, clothed in his usual hoodie and Dickies, came out of the bar holding something. He held it up and asked, "Is this yours?" Felicia looked at the blazer, grabbed for it, and then saw that the inside lining was covered in running horses. She sobbed harder, not able to tell Piers, but he got the picture and pulled Felicia into a hug, forcing her to end her pacing. She abandoned her lamentations. "So maybe it's not yours, but at least you have a jacket now," Piers said. Felicia pulled away and stumbled towards me and Sally. I stood and we fell, crying again, into each other's arms.

"I know it's not about the jacket," she cried.

"I know. But it was the perfect jacket."

She pulled back and looked at me. "It was."

* * *

The day finally arrived: Felicia's departure. I had to focus on the details, the technical needs of the day, to divert attention from how empty the room would be when Krissy and I returned from the bus stop.

"Do you have your passport?"

"Right here," she said, tucking it into the front pocket of her purse.

"And your phone and headphones?"

"Here and here."

"Hotel information for when you arrive in New York?"

"Tucked in my notebook and that's in my purse." She put her freshly organized bag on the floor next to her suitcases and looked at me.

I slumped on the bed. "Sure you can't stay?" I asked.

"I really wish I could," she said. "But you will do great on the MFA and you still have Krissy and Anna, and now you have Rich."

"You'll also have the bed to yourself," Krissy said coming into the room. "And we'll have more room in the flat."

"Though now that I see the holes where your stuff was," I said, "they aren't very big."

"You threw half of it away!" Felicia said.

The doorbell rang and Krissy picked up the intercom phone then pressed the button to unlock the front door to the building.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Delivery of some kind," Krissy said, opening the front door. She took the large brown envelope from the deliveryman, signing a rapid scribble on his handheld device and

closed the door. She looked at the name on the front of the package, smiled, and handed it to me where I sat on the end of the bed.

“What is it?”

“Open it,” Krissy said, she and Felicia standing over me. “I think it’s your visa.”

I tore into the envelope and saw letters, a flyer and my passport fall out. It was everything I’d sent in. I jumped up and shook the envelope, while Krissy picked up the top letter, printed on official paper.

“Wait, where is it?” I said.

Krissy’s eyes moved back and forth across the page, her face remaining neutral, then she held it out to me, saying, “It’s a rejection.” A look of shock slipped across Felicia’s face followed by a look of pity and fear.

I read the letter. My banking records had apparently not covered an entire thirty-day period, but only twenty-five days. I would have to re-submit my application if I wanted to try for the renewal again. It had taken three months from the day it was first submitted for the rejection letter to arrive. My current visa would become invalid in a week.

Krissy coughed, then looked at her watch, saying, “We should probably walk you to the bus stop now, Felicia.”

“Yea, it’s time,” she said. “I’m so sorry.” She looked at me and crumpled her face.

“It’ll be fine,” I said, slightly manic. “I’ll work it out, you don’t need to worry. All you need to worry about is getting to the airport. Krissy’s right let’s head out,” I said. I put the papers back into the brown envelope and left it on the bed, standing and moving to one of Felicia’s large rolling suitcases. Krissy grabbed the handle of the other and pulled open the front door.

“Goodbye, room,” Felicia said, looking back into the lounge we had made our bedroom. “Goodbye, flat. You were good.” She followed Krissy out the door and started down the steps as I pulled the front door closed behind me.

“Would it be weird,” Felicia asked, “to keep my keys?”

“Your house keys?” I asked.

“Yea, as a souvenir,” she said.

“I guess I don’t mind,” I said. “Technically they aren’t lost so we wouldn’t have to worry about changing the locks or anything.”

“Krissy?” Felicia called ahead of us to where Krissy was dragging Felicia’s bag down the street. “Do you care?”

“I don’t give a shit,” Krissy called over shoulder.

“I think I’m just so glad I got them back from the bar that I don’t want to let them go again,” Felicia said. We had gone back to *Barcadia* the morning after our tear-filled night on the sidewalk and even though the bar looked closed Felicia had knocked and the door had been opened. There were construction workers inside, their actions invisible due to the tinted glass windows. Felicia had described her jacket and the keys, which she didn’t realize she’d lost until we arrived home at three in the morning. It took two tries, but the construction worker returned with not only Felicia’s keys, hanging from a key ring with a yellow submarine and a red Welsh dragon, but also her jacket. It had been recovered.

In single file we made our way through the crowded bus station, dodging spinning children and adults oblivious to the fact that the station was also a sidewalk. We crossed the road and found the bus stop going in the correct direction, parked the suitcases and waited for the arrival of the airport express bus.

“Of course, I get rejected the day you leave me,” I said to Felicia as we stood on the sidewalk.

“That’s pretty shitty timing,” she said. “But it wasn’t a total rejection, was it? You can still get a visa and stay right?”

“I’m going to go down to the school, probably right after we see you off, and ask at the international office. I have a week left on my visa, and if I get a new application in process before that visa ends, I should be all right. If the school can’t help me, who can?”

“I’m sure it will all be fine,” she said.

“I’m just sorry this is all happening now! I want to be here and say goodbye, but I feel like half my head is in the flat with those papers.”

“I know this isn’t the way it should have happened, but I’m kind of glad we aren’t getting too emotional, because I don’t want to sit on the bus crying,” Felicia said.

“Oh, I might still cry,” I said. “It will just be later, when it has really hit me that you’re gone, and I have a ton of paperwork to do.”

“Yea that doesn’t help.”

“But in a way it does,” I said. “You’re leaving. I got a rejection. And all I can think about is how to remedy things so that I can stay. I really want to stay.”

The bus pulled up and stopped next to the sidewalk, hydraulics hissing as the front left corner of the bus lowered and the doors opened. Felicia waited for the few other people to board, turning to Krissy and giving her a big hug before turning to me. There wasn’t enough time, all the other people had boarded, and Felicia was the last one left. I let her go and Krissy and I helped her get her bags on board, and she secured them in the luggage rack before taking her seat. She waved to us through the window as the bus pulled

away, her head and shoulders turning so that she could see us for as long as possible before the bus went around a corner. And she was gone.

* * *

I spent hours in the international student office that week receiving help with my visa application. Two days before my visa was to expire, the new application was in the mail and I was safe until I either received a new visa or a new rejection. And that could apparently take months. For a moment I could breathe again. (It would only last until I saw my expiration date either way, and then the pressure to find another way to forestall my departure would return.) I wouldn't be deported just yet. I couldn't stand the idea of being made to leave, of being told I didn't have a choice to stay. I wanted my departure to be my choice. I didn't want paperwork to be the reason I went home.

Waiting for a visa created a strange atmosphere of limbo. It meant waiting for permission to stay. It meant not having a passport, therefore not having permission to leave. It was the closest I felt to being an expatriate in the literal sense of the word—without a passport I was no longer connected to or able to return to my previous country, and without the proper documentation I was not connected to or able to stay in the country I inhabited.

Six years later and I am engaged to an Englishman, surrounded by a British family, and planning for the day I greet my entire American family at the airport. Felicia will stand beside me, her new husband sitting in the audience as Rich and I say our vows.

I chose London. And London gave me Felicia. And Felicia's departure from London was necessary for my continued growth. She was the driving force when we were together,

and without her I would not have lived that first year and a half with as much vigour as I did. I needed her desperation, the hunger that caused her to scour the Internet for tickets to shows, to destinations and weird delights. I would have been too overwhelmed—by the thought of classes, essays, readings, public transportation, crowds of strangers, foreign languages, getting lost—to have planned jaunts to Europe and Wales let alone day trips into the city to stand in line for cheap theatre tickets. Felicia filled my need to feel connected, not just to another person but to the city we were in because she had the energy to not get overwhelmed by the differences. She introduced me to London in a way that I would start introducing Rich to the city when she left, spending our early dating years wandering through different parts of the city, visiting everything from the touristy wax museum to the latest art exhibitions. After Felicia left, and I began what felt like a constant struggle with visa renewals, I began to understand her drive better. It came from feeling time slip away, from seeing an ending and fearing the idea that that ending might suddenly appear, taking all the missed opportunities with it. If I had to leave, I was going to do and see as much as I could before I had to go.

I could not write about London without writing about Felicia. I can't walk through Trafalgar Square without sparing her a thought. She was only in London for a year and a half but her presence in that time set the tone for the next decade of my life. She may have gone home but I would not still be in London if it weren't for her. Had we not met, had she remained best new friends with the other blonde girl who sat beside her the first time I saw her, or if I had stayed friends with Kirsten from my first days, I might have been back in North Carolina years ago. She was the key. Without Felicia I would not have met Krissy, who lived with me for five years, or Rich because of the job Felicia got me at the restaurant. Rich would not be a carpenter if he hadn't listened to Felicia speak so passionately about writing,

passionately enough to make Rich realize he was not passionate about the creative writing course he was on. I think about those early years and Felicia's face is everywhere. I write about her because until I marry Rich, my decision to move to London was the biggest decision I've made, and Felicia—and the life I gained—was the consequence of that decision.

It was with Felicia that I started collecting expectations again. I had lost my own expectations years before, and for the most part I blame my relationship with Neil for that, but it isn't entirely true. Or it isn't entirely his fault that I lost my expectations and hopes for the future. I didn't know how to stand up for who I was when I was with him, and I let myself become quiet, handed over the thinking and decision making to him. He willingly took the reins because he felt he knew what was best and if I didn't protest then he must have been right. In the end, it took leaving the country for six weeks, being under the wing of my original caregiver, for me to take notice of expectations again. And all I could expect, by staying where I was, was more of the same. As I cried on the hotel bed in Prague, I looked at my mother and realized she expected more of me as well.

The biggest change I could effect was changing my location, breaking the relationship and leaving the house, I moved home and focused not on Neil's expectations of me, but on my parents'. What could I do to show them that though I had failed once, I could still make them proud? What could I do that would make me proud of myself?

Getting to London was a triumph, considering my older brother didn't think I would ever be capable of ordering for myself in a restaurant. But I hadn't thought beyond my arrival. Felicia was the one with expectations of life abroad. And she was happy to share those expectations, take me along with her as she fulfilled them. She wanted the cheap flights to Europe, the train tickets across Britain, the discounted theatre tickets, and signed

up for every experience she could afford. She expected to return to Kentucky. She wanted to return having had her fill, in case she could not return again soon.

When Felicia left, she left me with expectations. She expected me to continue what we had started, to continue taking advantage of the shows, the musicals, the museums, the exhibitions. She left me—holding a rejection letter—with the knowledge of the pressure associated with a looming departure. She might as well have turned to me as she stepped on the bus and said, “Now you know how it feels, to know you have to leave, and to know you will have to say goodbye to all this. Don’t forget that feeling.”

I am grateful to her, for coming to London and bringing such zeal with her. For being something familiar and homelike to me, which allowed me to face the differences of living away from home. I am grateful to her for leaving, because by leaving she gave me room to realize and appreciate my own expectations.

At Home Abroad:

An exploration into the genres of expatriate literature

Chapter 1: Introduction

I left home, North Carolina, and moved to England eight years ago. This thesis came about as a result of my attempts to better understand and document that journey.

My new circle of friends consisted mainly of American women, other students around my age, and we joked about our little band of expats. I had a vague understanding of expatriates, I had read Hemingway in high school and again in university, but beyond associating expats with the world wars and writing, I hadn't given the word or its meaning much thought. Throughout my early studies at Kingston University, I focused on memoir and life writing while writing about my life back home. When I started writing creatively for this PhD, it wasn't until an outsider classified my work as being that of an expatriate that I considered the topic as my opportunity to become more specific with the nature of my research.

The thesis, both creative and critical, that has resulted from my research into expatriate literature was in service to helping me find a way to frame my thinking so that I might better understand my own story. This work is original and significant because it works to bring the research on expatriate literature up to date, so that it might be understood in modern terms of what it means to leave home and live abroad. I began with reading modern memoirs and novels on the expatriate experience. Nancy K. Miller, in But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives, (2002), describes reading memoirs as a way to feed "the hunger for a different, or at least more interesting life through

literature....however hellish the lives, told in memoirs they give you just what your unrecorded history lacks (and that the novel used to offer): a narrative through which to make sense of your own past” (12). Though reading memoirs may give us a look into different lives, it is how we react to them that starts shaping our own stories. N.K. Miller writes about reading autobiography as a relational act, stating,

The bonds and desires that attract readers to the contemporary memoir have everything to do with attachment. What seems to connect memoir writers and their readers is a bond created through identifications and –just as importantly– disidentifications (But Enough 2-3).

I had hoped that researching the subject of expatriation would give me a greater insight (through how I identified and disidentified with the narratives I read) to the choices I—as well as others in multiple generations of my family—had made.

My mother, firmly entrenched in genealogical research from before I can remember, continues to unearth family members—from both my parents’ sides— that left home and travelled somewhere new, often to other countries, to start new lives. At least once in a generation, an “escapee”, as Dad called them, would set out, buck tradition—become a miner, or travel from America to Japan to open a university, or leave Denmark for London only to end up in America a year later. I am not the first, and most likely will not be the last, in my family to leave home in a drastic fashion. But what made some of these people “expatriates” and others “immigrants”?

I use the word expatriate to designate someone who voluntarily lives outside the home country. Maquna Remarque Koutonin and Christopher DeWolf both raise the question as to whether the term ‘expatriate’ in itself is an exclusionist term, designating white, upper-middle class people from the West who choose to live abroad, as opposed to the word ‘migrant’ which tends to denote people of colour moving for work purposes, or

'immigrant' as a person who moves from one country to another.¹ In her essay "The New Nomads," Eva Hoffman, an exile herself, discusses the degree of choice and ability related to moving abroad, stating:

It matters enormously, for starters, whether you choose to leave or are forced to; it matters also whether you're coming to a new land unprotected and unprovided for or whether you can expect, or transport, some kind of safety net.²

All the expatriate writers in this thesis have the ability to transport, or are provided with, a safety net, making their experiences very different from that of a refugee or immigrant with no way or ability to go home.

Bharati Mukherjee puts the difference between expatriates and immigrants down to the future goals each holds, with immigration having the end goal of citizenship within the new country, while expatriation is a perpetual state of living outside one's original home with no intention of officially adopting another.³ In his critical study, The Great Expatriate Writers (1992), Stoddard Martin keeps to a strict definition of what constitutes an expatriate, echoing Mukherjee's conclusions of intent. Martin states, "An expatriate in the pure sense is someone who has left his country behind and does not long to go back to reform it but wants to establish a new life elsewhere with other loyalties...precisely because they were in quest of some higher, better and perhaps finally unrealizable idea of

¹ For a brief article discussing these terms see "Why are white people expats when the rest of us are immigrants?" by Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, written for The Guardian in March 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration>

and Christopher DeWolf "In Hong Kong, Just Who Is An Expat, Anyway?" on The Wall Street Journal Online (written on December 29, 2014 blogs.wsj.com).

² Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads" from Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss ed. Andre Aciman (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.40.

³ Bharati Mukherjee, "Imagining Homelands" from Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss ed. Andre Aciman (New York: The New Press, 1999).

civilization”.⁴ Like Mukherjee, Martin believes that seeking citizenship removes one from the category of expatriate, as “an expatriate in the great tradition longs to be free of belonging to anything but his own destiny and ideals” (Martin 4). To be an expatriate one cannot accept a new nation but must remain outside of a nation to properly consider him or herself an ex-patriot. While these different goals do not necessarily connote different races or classes of people, Mukherjee offers an image to display the different reactions to immigration and expatriation.

The narrative of expatriation calls to mind villas in the south of France, on the shores of Lake Geneva, apartments in Paris, but it is no stranger to Detroit as well. The narrative of expatriation fairly drips with respectability, or at least with privilege, but the narrative of immigration calls to mind crowded tenements, Ellis Island, sweatshops, accents, strange foods, taxicab drivers, bizarre holidays, strange religions, unseemly ethnic passions (79).

There are images and stereotypes relating to the different terms that name a person who leaves his or her home country, with expatriate often resembling an expensive and luxurious holidaymaker, while immigrant or migrant often connotes poor and looking for work outside of a home country with nothing to offer. For Mukherjee and Hoffman, the ultimate difference between expatriates and other terms for those living abroad is the element of choice in where and how one lives abroad, expatriation the term connoting the most choice. In this essay, the expatriate narratives are all those of educated individuals of some means—whether through work, spousal, or parental supplement—who tend to come from the western world to the old world of Europe or the new centres of commerce in Asia.

Not all my relatives were necessarily expatriates; they could be classified as many things, but I wanted to focus on expatriates because that was how I classified myself and my

⁴ Stoddard Martin, 1948-, The Great Expatriate Writers (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) p.2 and p.17.

father. My mother's grandmother—Grandma P—never naturalized, so she could be called an expatriate by Martin's definition, as I don't believe she ever had the intention of returning to Denmark. Her husband, Grandpa P, did naturalize, which would classify him as an immigrant for Martin, as well as Mukajerree. Peter Vrooman, the ancestor who went to Japan, eventually came home and moved to the west coast, which would disqualify him from Martin's definition of expatriate.

So, I had narrowed my vocabulary to expatriate. To me the word felt twofold: 'ex' and 'patriate'. In order for one to be an 'ex', there must be something from which one is separated. Which indicates that the thing one is separated from still plays a large part in one's life. In leaving, one creates the thing from which one has left.

That didn't always make defining 'expatriate' easy. And the research seemed largely focused on the Lost Generation, the giving of a name to a group marking the apparent start of the expatriate as a thing one could be, as opposed to travel as something one does. (I go into the details of this research in the following chapters.)

When I started reading about the Beat Generation in the 50s and 60s, I thought about my father. He graduated from university in the early 60s and joined the Peace Corps. Avoiding Vietnam was one reason, but Dad was also avoiding convention and expectation—something I associate not only with the Beats, but with all expatriates. His brother had rebelled by becoming a lawyer rather than an engineer like their father. "He decided to become the guy our Dad complained about, getting in the way of getting things done." My father went to Samoa and avoided it all. I also know that at some point he was engaged, but I don't know if that was before Samoa or if it contributed to his continuing to find work abroad after Samoa. He's not an easy man to figure out, and I often wonder if he edits himself knowing that I am a writer. I know I edit myself and wonder if I got that tendency

from him. But I wasn't running from societal convention, or even the expectations of my parents to be something in particular. As a family, we had already had an unconventional life: we moved from place to place, or between places, constantly—even spent a few years living on a boat. In fact, since I moved to London, I have been at the same street address for the longest uninterrupted period of my life. Expatriation gave me a more conventional life in many ways. As a kid, I went to camp for a month every summer for 7 years so that I could spend an extended amount of time away from my brothers' summer tennis tour of the South. So, when it comes to convention, I left home, maybe to escape my parents' life style—a typical move for most young people—but it wasn't necessarily comparable to my father who worked strange jobs in different countries in order not to deal with familial expectations.

When it came to reading about modern, or current, expatriate literature I felt a bit lost. There were books that talked about expatriation from a sociological angle⁵, as more and more people move around the globe for career reasons. There were travel memoirs galore, but I still wasn't sure what my angle on the subject was. It seemed that before I could figure out what expatriate literature was saying to me about my life, I needed a way to talk about the literature at all. I needed a way to differentiate between the types of books I was reading, a way to figure out what these types of narratives were saying so that I could understand where my story fit in and what I had to say about my experience with expatriation in comparison.

⁵ For instance, [The Intercultural Mind: Connecting Culture, Cognition and Global Living](#) (2015) by Joseph Shaules and [The End of Belonging: Untold stories of leaving home and the psychology of global relocation](#) (2010) by Greg A Madison, PhD. There is also research into the lives of the children of expatriates, such as [The Writer and the Overseas Childhood: The Third Culture Literature of Kingsolver, McEwan and Others](#) (2012) by Antje M. Rauwerda.

My research is unique because it is a reflection of my personal evolving understanding of the literature as viewed through the search for understanding about my own narrative. The narrative I wrote was directly influenced by the research and in turn the direction of my narrative influenced the way I viewed the results of my research. As stated in the Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement, produced by the National Association of Writers in Education, "Creative Writing is not primarily a vehicle for what may be termed 'factual' knowledge, but a synthesizing process that brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative interpretation and representation of experience."⁶ This thesis, in its two parts, I believe is a pure representation of that synthesizing process. The fact that the research sprung from the original creative subject matter, to that same subject matter being rewritten in light of the research (and how it continues to bring up questions for research that could not be addressed within the bounds of this thesis) is proof of that process. I was made aware of my work as expatriate writing, studied expatriate writing and then when I returned to my own work, I realized I had hardly mentioned the city I was now living in. Upon reflection, not only did I attempt to rectify the lack of location in my writing, but I was made to think that perhaps my narrative was not about location as much as it was about figuring out the relationships that come about as a result of the relocation. When it comes to writing about other people, especially those we care deeply about, issues arise. I wasn't generating a sense of location, because I wasn't being honest about people on the page.

When I first moved to England, I wrote a piece for my MA dissertation about breaking up with a university boyfriend, moving home, and helping my mother care for her

⁶ NAWA Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement 2018 section 2.4, p. 5.

mother as she descended deeper into Alzheimer's. Writing about these people, and these relationships produced a sense of place that I wasn't achieving in my expatriate narrative. For one, I had broken off the main relationship that featured in my narrative. I never expected to see him again or for him to read the work, and I'd had a year to think back on the relationship and pick out all the parts I had glazed over in my effort to make it work, to keep it going. The relationship having ended, I was free to analyse him, his behaviour, and me and my reactions to him. It had an ending in time which gave it a sense of narrative drama I could work with. It had a sense of place because one of the main scenes involved packing up a house, breaking apart a home we had shared together after I had been away from it for a few months. I could pinpoint moments and recognize their significance, understand why they stuck with me. Nostalgia allowed me to colour in the life I had lived there, compared to the challenge of trying to create the distance required to write about the present, or something ongoing.

I could say anything about my grandmother because she had Alzheimer's, she wouldn't know. Also, my family has a strange sense of humour, not least my grandmother, and she would have been glad to know we were taking any joy we could out of our time with her. Again, my grandmother's disease would provide an ending, and the fact that my mother spent most of her free time cleaning out grandma's house created a focus—the house as starting point for all the stories unearthed in its cleaning—that created a sense of place.

Writing about my mother was more difficult, but because I had the narrative device of caring for an ailing parent, I had multiple lenses through which to view my mother. My mother's identity was being offered up to me from every direction, whether it was through cleaning out her childhood home, entertaining visitors who came to see her mother, or

speaking on her mother's behalf. There was also a strange mingling of the two women as one cared for the other: my grandmother was becoming a shell and my mother was constantly filling in for her own mother's identity, repeatedly acting as her memory, her voice, even being taken for my grandmother when a long-lost friend came to the front door. Mom opened the door and a tall, well dressed black man took off his sunglasses and asked, "Mrs Owen?"

"No, that's my mother," she said.

"Anna?"

"Jerome?"

"You look just like I remember her looking when I would come over here as a kid."

There was so much context that I could use to shape the story, the characters, and the place, that only now I suppose I knew how to work with because it was already mine. I knew how to describe my grandmother's dentures perched happily on the window sill above the kitchen sink because I had gotten so used to seeing them there—slightly yellowed veneers against the darkly stained and varnished wood—that I'd taken a picture.

Moving to England—expatriating—removed the context. I fell back on my previous context—places like my grandmother's home or the home I'd shared in a failed relationship—in my writing, using it as a way of coping with what felt like a lack of context in my new life. By context, I mean to say, how I fit into the places/locations I inhabit. Patricia L. Wasielewski would probably call this "emotional geography", explained in her 2015 essay "The Magic of Oaxaca: An Emotional Geography of Age, Gender and Nation": "Emotional geography refers to how a place evokes and allows for particular emotions, focusing on their *embodiment* in the particular spaces and the experiences that frame, complicate,

challenge, and allow us to reflect upon *where* we are, when we feel what we feel.”⁷My context, or emotional geography, was vast and familiar in the States, but when I arrived in England my context shrank to a handful of previous visits, repeated readings of *Harry Potter*, repeated viewings of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and *Pride and Prejudice*—both novel and BBC.

My focus, the start of the laying down of my cognitive map⁸, was on navigating the literal geography. Going somewhere was about finding where I needed to be before I needed to be there and was only occasionally interspersed with moments of shock at finding myself abroad, enjoyed for so long before being replaced with anxiety about not appearing useless or stupid. In a way, I could suppress, had to suppress, some of the experience or I wouldn’t have been able to carry on. It’s like focusing on a fixed point so that one can maintain balance while standing on one foot. I would have fallen over if I’d taken too much notice. My ex, my grandmother and the way my mother and her siblings were caring for her, were my fixed points. Felicia, the main character in my expat narrative, became a fixed point as well. Because I broke up with my ex, because my time with my grandmother had ended (and because I knew it wouldn’t be long before mom’s time with her ended as well), and because Felicia eventually moved back to Kentucky, I was able to see their stories as complete, or at least as episodes with story lines that had either ended or changed significantly enough to signify a new beginning.

⁷ Patricia L. Wasielewski, “The Magic of Oaxaca: An Emotional Geography of Age, Gender and Nation” in *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 38, Issue 4, Nov 2015.

⁸ See *Women, America, and Movement: Narratives of Relocation*, ed by Susan L. Roberson (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998) “Roger Downs and David Stea define cognitive mapping as a process by which we locate, navigate, find our way: ‘*Cognitive mapping* is an abstraction covering those cognitive or mental abilities that enable us to collect, organize, store, recall, and manipulate information about the special environment.’” (p.9).

Creating distance between the character that goes through an event and the narrator as they are on the other side was something I struggled with in my expatriate narrative because I—the character—did not feel ‘on the other side’ yet. The distance was not intrinsically there as it had been with my previous circumstances and choice of writing subject. I would have to use specific moments—moments that came wrapped in endings—in order to find the distance I would need for the rest of my expatriate narrative.

Specifically, I used the scene where Freddie and I talk about our previous housing situations, and I have an epiphany as a starting point for finding my distance.

Of course, this was all from my point of view. I don’t actually know how he felt about what I had said. I created reactions for him, because these were the things that occurred to me as I spoke to him. I imagine my words had an impact, when I have no way of knowing what that impact was. But the interaction sparked something for me, changed the way I thought about him and about myself. I gave Freddie reactions—when in reality he simply sat there and said nothing—because those were the reactions I needed him to be having, whether I knew that in the moment or only after hours of thought. I wanted to believe the reactions I’d attributed to him because they made me feel better about myself.

Distance, as well as time, allows one to take responsibility for how one saw things, how one remembers things, and to know that those memories are subjective and must be examined for subjectivity. But one must also be aware of one’s subjectivity when it comes to writing about the real people in our lives.

I saw this difficulty—how to write about our loved ones—playing out over the various narratives I read while researching expatriate literature. The three novels I focus on in the rest of this thesis all showed authorial decisions being made about how the lives of others would be handled in their work. Ben Lerner chose to label his 2011 narrative, Leaving the Atocha Station, “A Novel”, though it bears similarities to his life. Did he choose to call it fiction so that he might alter, shape, edit, or disguise his words behind the idea that they

may not be real, even if they ring true? Brigid Keenan, in Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse (2005), calls her husband “AW” throughout her memoir, never going into much detail about the private aspects of their relationship as husband and wife beyond his briefly described career as an ambassador being the reason for her expatriate status. She talks about her two daughters but sticks to how raising them as an expat created general difficulties. She manages to include her family as the obvious players in her life—her reason for being an expat as well as the main focus of much of her adult life—while keeping them vague enough that one knows she is respecting their privacy—their right not to be exposed as Keenan goes about the task of exposing her own life in print. Francis Mayes, in Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy (1996), mentions her partner, Ed, enough times that the reader doesn’t forget that Mayes isn’t alone, however, Mayes barely gives Ed any definition at all aside from being someone who enjoys eating, drinking, and DIY. She keeps his opinions wrapped up in her own. We know nothing of his history—while we know of Mayes’s previous marriage and adult children. Both Ed and AW are instruments, tools that either progress the plot or act as vague companions or props within the narrative.

The active awareness of how others fit into our stories and the tricky business of sorting out where our stories end and theirs begin was one of my struggles as I worked on my own narrative. It became especially difficult when I started to recognise that my expatriation was not so much national as it was familial.

Distance can breed objectivity, but it breeds something else too. It breeds fantasy. People, relationships, place, they all become mythic, remembering a memory until it becomes key words and images, until faults and glories become magnified. I say characters because the people who are so far away lose their personhood in a way, becoming

characters in the stories we tell about them. I think this is why my parents can call and tell me stories about things that happened the month before, when I was visiting, and forget that I was an active participant within that same story. Perhaps that is why Lerner chose autofiction, because all our memories are based on character's we've created based on people we don't really know anymore. Maybe choosing autofiction is another representation of the way relationships change, or on the way relationships fail when, as Lerner's protagonist demonstrates, they are not based on real people at all but on the ideal we hope and want those real people to be.

As for Keenan and Mayes, keeping key players in one's real life on the side-lines of one's narrative may also speak to (aside from personal privacy considerations) the need to take ownership of one's actions and experiences. Keenan agreed to follow AW in his career, but she never said anything about making her life all about him. Instead her story is about maintaining her identity beyond being AW's wife and mother to his children. Mayes, having been through a divorce may have kept Ed on the edges as a way of maintaining ownership of the desire to move to Italy. After all, the book is about coming back to herself through the process of carving out her own slice of the Italian countryside.

Though these are only guesses as to authors' intentions, how people and relationships are handled is a reflection of the process of figuring out what one has to say about those people. Adam, Lerner's protagonist, tries to mask who he really is, even though he tried and failed to do that before at university, the same way Lerner masks his story behind the moniker 'A Novel.' Mayes wants to get back to her roots and who she was before, so she doesn't include Ed as he is along for the ride but not integral to the revelations she chooses to share with the reader. Keenan must include AW as he is her driving force, but as a way of asserting her agency she keeps his appearance abbreviated.

Felicia, the subject of my expatriate narrative, is a combination of a fixed point—a moment with its own context that I can imagine as ended—as well as an ongoing relationship. I can appreciate her departure from England as an ending, as the close of a chapter, and because we went through ninety percent of it together, I feel more at ease writing about her than I would if I were to write about her life after she moved back to Kentucky. She also understands—not in the least because she is a writer—that the character of Felicia in my narrative is my memory of her and what she represented to me then and now, but she is no longer that person. That character is based on someone who only existed for a short period eight years ago. Half the point of the character in the narrative is that she is changed by her time abroad and leaves for Kentucky determined not to be who she was when she left it the first time.

Seeing how these writers have chosen to write about their loved ones is also an indication of the fact that these narratives have been consciously shaped, whether purely for narrative quality or in order to distort the truth. Shaping my own story to better work as a written narrative took me years to accept. With the story of my mother and grandmother I was adamant about fact over fiction, not wanting to alter a single detail. I had ideas about historical records—like the ones my own mother cherished. When it came to my own story, the expat narrative, I found it much easier to leave things out—and much harder to put things in. Distance may breed objectivity when it comes to others, but it takes longer to achieve that same objectivity about oneself. Though one might find reasons or logical explanations for writing in a way that may hurt the feelings of others, those same reasons and logical explanations are easily turned in the service of protecting one's own private thoughts and actions. I had to attempt to find the balance.

Finding the balance, wading through the morals and ethics of life writing, is far beyond the scope of this thesis, but encountering these questions, struggling with the answers through my own writing, was a part of the process that in turn coloured my research. Reading critics such as Paul John Eakin⁹ made me aware of relational identity and the idea that we cannot have our own stories without the involvement of others as well as the difficulty of inclusion in light of things like privacy laws and what happens when one is found to be in breach of the autobiographical pact. Nancy K. Miller awakened me to the idea of critic as autobiographer, as well as writing autobiographically within one's criticism.¹⁰ She also delved into the ethics of writing about one's parents and the difficulties of writing the relational identity. More specifically to do with the morals and ethics of writing as an expatriate, David C. Oh and Chuyun Oh wrote a piece titled "Vlogging White Privilege Abroad: *Eat Your Kimchi's* Eating and Spitting Out of the Korean Other on Youtube" (2017) about being aware of how one is approaching and speaking about other cultures.¹¹ There is far too much research on the ethics of life writing than can be cited in this thesis, but this nonetheless is still an example of an author working to record her story in a way that treats those within its scope with the respect due to them and their stories.

⁹ How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999); Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008); The Ethics of Life Writing, ed. by (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts (New York: Routledge, 1991); Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000); But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Breathless: An American Girl in Paris (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2013).

¹¹ David C. Oh, Chuyun Oh, "Vlogging White Privilege Abroad: *Eat Your Kimchi's* Eating and Spitting Out of the Korean Culture on Youtube", in Communication, Culture and Critique, Volume 10, Issue 4, December 2017.

What I can say about the chapters that follow is that they are the beginning of my understanding of the subject of expatriate literature and the framework that I created so that I might better navigate my own narrative. Of course, as one inevitably finds at the end of some research project, this thesis—my work to name and define different types of expatriate narratives, distinguishing them from each other and comparing their origins in expatriate literature of times past—barely scratches the surface of the subject. I had been focusing on the aspect of *leaving* home. Who was leaving? What did they leave behind? I hadn't given much thought to the rest of the concept: to the idea of *home* in itself, to the idea of a home as a place, home as a stationary place, or home as a nomadic concept. I had thought of place in terms of comparison, but not the depth to which identity is intrinsically tied to stability and to disruption (of place etc). Susan Stanford Friedman puts it eloquently in her book *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (1998), when she says,

Traveling is a concept that depends upon the notion of stasis to be comprehensible. Routes are pathways between here and there, two points of rootedness. Identity often requires some form of displacement—literal or figurative—to come to consciousness. Leaving home brings into being the idea of “home,” the perception of its identity as distinct from elsewhere (SSF 151).

The subject of expatriate literature can be approached from so many perspectives along this single binary of routes/roots, and I was only approaching my story from that of routes, how I moved from one place to another (what it looked like when others wrote about their moves to new places). I hadn't gone into the rooted aspects of my life (or into the various ways the other authors inevitably wrote of or did not write of home). When I read this chapter in Friedman's book, I was struck by how much my roots were intertwined with routes. What did that mean for me in comparison to these other authors? Had their

childhoods been physically stable and connected to one place, while mine had not? Would that alter the ways I would view my move compared to the way they viewed theirs?

If, as Friedman states, travel depends on the idea of a stable place to be comprehensible, then Louis DeSalvo's book On Moving: A Writer's Meditation on New Houses, Old Haunts, and Finding Home Again (2009), is an examination of how the loss of those once stable places can shake the very foundation of our identities. DeSalvo examines the lives and work of multiple creatives as they ponder their own significant relocations, discussing Henry Miller in Paris, Eavan Boland moving to the suburbs of Dublin, Virginia Woolf moving in and out of London, and many others including D.H. Lawrence never settling in one location for very long. She examines the many reactions to different moves throughout the ages (as well as detailing her own move which prompted the writing of the book) and understands that moving—and all it entails— “is a full scale life inspection thrust upon me” (64). It forces one to troll through one's own past and face the bits and pieces that may have been hidden away. It creates an ending that makes one look back.

And moving *is* a kind of death. For we must let go of a place, though we may not want to, and of the spaces that have held special significance for us, though, being human, we have no doubt taken them for granted...And we let go, too of the person we used to be in that place, even as we cannot quite believe how mutable we are (80-81).

The idea of change, of moving offering the opportunity to evolve, to explore new identities, is of course behind the motivation of the expatriate, as I will explore in the following chapter, but the depth to which travel and relocation—routes versus roots—deeply change our identities, and the fact of identity's mutability, is beyond the scope of this thesis. These topics could greatly deepen our understanding of the different types of expatriate literature as well as allow for a more thorough comparison between expatriate and immigrant literature, but this thesis is only the beginning of that understanding.

Chapter 2: An Overview of the History of Expatriate Literature

In this critical essay, I plan to examine the evolution of the expatriate narrative from the initial increase of Americans traveling to, and writing about, Europe in the 1920's to the proliferation of diverse travel narratives since the turn of the twenty-first century. This thesis will look at a number of exemplary texts in order to consider the different reasons for and reactions to expatriation today compared to those of the 20's and 30's, and how possible changes in the impulse to leave home—the familiar locations and connections of childhood as well as loved ones and possible careers—have affected the expatriate narrative. This thesis will demonstrate three major types of expatriate narratives, all with similar but distinct focuses and themes revolving around a spectrum from isolation to community involvement.

I will read three modern expatriate texts—Frances Mayes' 1996 memoir Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy, Ben Lerner's 2011 novel Leaving the Atocha Station, and Brigid Keenan's 2005 memoir Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse—as archetypes of the three types of expatriate narratives and how they might correspond to or differ from the expatriate narratives of the inter war era. I call these three twenty-first century groups Sabbatical Expatriate narratives, Bohemian Expatriate narratives, and Trailing Spouse Expatriate narratives.¹² Sabbatical expatriate narratives tend to be written by older, more well off travellers who write either about a year off from their normal lives

¹² The term 'trailing spouse' was first seen in a 1981 Wall Street Journal article by Mary Bralove, titled "Problems of Two-Career Families Start Forcing Businesses to Adapt." < <http://blogs.wsj.com/expat/2015/07/06/portrait-of-a-trailing-spouse-dependent-dejected-and-learning-to-give-herself-some-slack/>>

or of spending part of the year in a second home abroad.¹³ Bohemian expatriate narratives tend to be concerned with students or solo travellers who spend at least a year abroad¹⁴, and trailing spouse narratives often follow the move of entire families in order to follow a partner's career abroad for anywhere from a year to multiple years.¹⁵

1. The Modern Archetypes and Corresponding Texts

Sabbatical expatriate narratives, often concerning older and more well to do travellers, show more faith in the expatriation process and focus largely on joining a community rather than leaving one behind and learning about one's adopted culture; exploring "the deeper pleasure of learning to live another kind of life."¹⁶ For the sabbatical expatriate narrative, the focus is on the expansion of the self, rather than the hope of 'finding' oneself. It is an exploration of the self "transplanted", as Hemingway would say, finding new soil in which to grow.¹⁷ "I always wondered who I might be if I could speak [French]," Michael Sadler said in his 2002 memoir, An Englishman in Paris (p 6). Sadler knows who he is at home but wants to test himself within the contexts of a new language and in "another kind of life," as Mayes

¹³ Examples of sabbatical expatriate narratives being Peter Mayle's A Year in Provence (1989), Ferenc Mate's The Hills of Tuscany: A New Home in an Old Land (1998), Mark Greenside's I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do): Living in a Small Village in Brittany (2008), Carol Drinkwater's The Olive Farm: A Memoir of Life, Love and Olive Oil in the South of France (2011). And as a reaction to the popularity of such books there is even one titled "Whaddya Mean a Year in Provence?" a 2013 e-book written by Evan Llewellyn.

¹⁴ Examples of Bohemian Expatriate narratives are Teju Cole's Open City (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013), and Elizabeth Eaves's Wanderlust: A Love Affair with Five Continents (2011).

¹⁵ For examples of Trailing Spouse narratives see Janice Y.K. Lee's The Expatriates (2016), Sarah MacDonald's Holy Cow!: An Indian Adventure (2002), Jennifer Steil's The Woman Who Fell From the Sky (2002).

¹⁶ Frances Mayes, Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy 1996 (London: Bantam Books, 2003) p 12. From this point abbreviated within the text as (UTS).

¹⁷ Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, 1936 (London: Arrow Books, 2004) 3.

said. Specifically, as this thesis progresses, Frances Mayes's 1996 memoir, Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy, will represent the sabbatical expatriate narrative. Mayes writes of spending summers in Italy buying and renovating a house in the Tuscan countryside. As is the case with sabbatical expatriate narratives, a comic or even pastoral mode is employed, and the narrator experiences only minor tribulations and shifts in perspective as they immerse themselves in the local culture, attempting to become a local in the process. Victory comes for Mayes at the end of her memoir, "What luck—the intense sense of community that we once observed in this small hilltown now includes us. We are comfortable in a wider, deeper sense than I ever dreamed" (UTS 293). Her goal of becoming a part of the Cortona community is complete as she feels as though she truly belongs and is no longer just the American who happened to buy a house down the road.

These tales tend to be idyllic and romantic versions of life abroad in small picturesque European towns where life always feels like a vacation. Peter Mayle, in A Year in Provence (1989), described New Year's Day in France saying, "it was hard to associate the sunshine and dense blue sky outside with the first of January but, as everyone kept telling us, it was quite normal. After all, we were in Provence."¹⁸ The locals take the sky and weather for granted while the newcomer rejoices in even the mundane aspects of his new location as every one of them has the potential to surprise and delight where it may have been ignored or taken for granted in the home country. These narratives have a distinct sense of joy at, and embracing of, the new and different with the understanding that embracing such things will in turn bring them closer to their chosen homes and communities. Sadler happily eats a pig's ear offered to him by his new French friends,

¹⁸ Peter Mayle, A Year In Provence 1989 (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p.4.

knowing, “National pride was at stake,” if he did not consume said ear. Upon consumption and pronouncing his positive opinion he was accepted: “They had been right to invite me. I had passed the test. I was one of them” (Sadler 70). Embracing the culinary offerings of his peers ensures Sadler’s continued invitation to dine as well as to sit in the café, drink, and partake of the community gossip.

The sabbatical expatriate narratives also display a more stable sense of self based on the home county. Mayes, Sadler, Mayle, and Alice Steinbach, all start their narratives with academic jobs on summer leave or yearlong sabbatical, are retired, or chose to leave a journalism position. All have, or had, careers that afforded them a sense of self—though, in Steinbach’s case, “My work was not only what I did but who I was...at times I felt my identity was narrowing down to one thing—being a reporter.”¹⁹ For her, expatriation was a way to reconnect to the parts of herself she had let slide in the face of parenthood and having a career. The sabbatical expatriate narrative shows the attempt to reconnect to and expand the self through “transplanting”, examining the self in new surroundings.

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The bohemian expatriate narrative, often concerning students or solo travellers, is generally centred around someone who struggles with his or her identity in the home country and hopes expatriation will be a means of finding themselves while questioning the entire process of finding oneself through expatriation. Ben Lerner’s Leaving the Atocha Station (2011) will stand as the example of the bohemian expatriate narrative: the story of Adam, a poetry student on a fellowship in Madrid, who struggles to fit into the Spanish community and questions the idea of authenticity in life as well as in his work. “I was worried that failing

¹⁹ Alice Steinbach, Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman (London: Bantam Books, 2000), p.15.

to appear...would somehow constitute the breaking point of my relationship with the foundation...that the total vacuity of my project would finally be revealed and I would be sent home in shame.”²⁰ He fears being revealed, and having his work revealed, for the fake he believes himself to be. He admits that he isn’t sure why he can’t detach himself from the work he didn’t quite believe in: “I was surprised to find myself inclined to defend a project I’d never clearly delineated, let alone ever planned to complete, as opposed to conceding its total vacuity” (LAS 50). Perhaps in the home country he would have admitted his project was simply hot air and that he was really just killing time and poetry was just something he did on occasion. But as an expatriate he was invested in what his project said about himself—what the failure to complete it said about his ability to survive expatriation—as he was, after all, on a supposed journey of self-discovery supported by that project. His work was what ultimately included him in a precarious social circle, but his lack of productivity surrounding his work was what threatened his position as being part of something bigger than himself.

The bohemian expatriate narrative confronts the struggle with isolation and tends to find the main character slightly apart from his or her experiences, constantly questioning their position in terms of belonging. Adam reveals his feelings for his position as an American abroad:

I reserved my most intense antipathy for those Americans who attempted to blend in...Each member of this shadowy network resented the others, who were irritating reminders that nothing was more American, whatever that means, than fleeing the American, whatever that is, and that their soft version of self-imposed exile was just another of the late empire’s packaged tours (LAS 48-9).

²⁰ Ben Lerner, Leaving the Atocha Station 2011 (London: Granta Books, 2013) p.35. From here this title will be cited in text as (LAS).

This passage immediately reveals Adam's hatred for himself, as he was the American attempting to blend in. The fact that these 'members' 'resented' each other does not discount the fact that they are part of a type—members of the same group that have travelled around Europe on those Great Tours in the hope of education and a greater world view, of coming home a man more capable than the boy who had ventured forth. Adam is not one of a kind; he is not different or unique, as he would prefer others to see him. Encountering another of his kind is 'irritating' because it reminds him of his failure to be anything other than a poser trying to blend in. How can he trust that expatriation will bring him any more of a sense of authenticity than he had at home, if he is continually reminded of his own inauthenticity?

In contrast to Adam's awareness of inauthentic tendencies, it takes Elisabeth Eaves, in her 2010 memoir Wanderlust: A Love Affair with Five Continents, longer to connect that a large part of her desire to travel is the ability it affords her to be inauthentic, namely unfaithful.

I think it's just too tempting to have two lives rather than one. Some people think that too much travel begets infidelity: Separation and opportunity test the bonds of love. I think it's more likely that people who hate to make choices, to settle on one thing or another, are attracted to travel. Travel doesn't beget a double life. The appeal of the double life begets travel (Eaves 251).

Eaves is unable to settle because there is always something else right around the corner, and in order not to miss out on either life, she chooses both, taking the idea that travel allows you the chance to try on new lives in a very literal way. Eaves, however, rationalizes her position throughout the entire memoir—she “wanted to be different people, and just as much, to see what sort of core remained as I shifted from skin to skin” (Eaves 157). Lerner, on the other hand, makes Adam's self-loathing clear, making his protagonist struggle with his conflicting desires to find authenticity while wishing to present a far more impressive

version of himself to his new environment. Adam's struggle indicates that he feels there should be a real version, and that ultimately, a closet full of 'skins' still hides a truth underneath and moving away or pretending to be something different won't change that.

The trailing spouse expatriate narrative—which can follow couples or whole families—has the potential to fall anywhere on the spectrum between the other two categories' attitudes toward isolation and community, and often shows very different reasons for expatriation. Standing as an example of the trailing spouse expatriate narrative is Brigid Keenan's Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse (2005), which presents the life and adventures of Brigid and her ambassador husband as they spend multiple years at various postings around the globe from Ethiopia to Barbados to Syria, all the while raising two daughters.

The trailing spouse expatriate narrative highlights how other people impact the choice to expatriate as well as how going abroad does not always lead to an expansion of self, a lifting of rules, or an escape from familial expectations. Keenan's story is a light-hearted tale of attempting to create various homes in various locations, and though she faces hardships and scary situations—such as hearing about “all the other attacks (rapes, killings, dismemberments and mutilations) that had ever happened to white people in Port of Spain, in spite of burglar bars...and alarm systems...”²¹—these moments are handled with humour as though they are secondary issues to living abroad.

When her husband proposed, he told her, “I can't promise you'll be rich but I do promise you'll never be bored” (DB 70). And though she isn't ever “plain bored,” she does

²¹ Brigid Keenan, Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse (London: John Murry, 2005) p.132. From here this title will be referenced as (DB).

suffer from “feelings of inadequacy and failure” (DB 11) from lack of a straightforward career and from being narrowed down to “an appendage” as the wife of an ambassador (DB 12). Career, and the identity one receives from a career, is the main focus in the trailing spouse narrative as the spouse is often reduced to mother and wife as her sole identity when expected “to sacrifice themselves on the altars of their husbands’ ambitions” (DB 13). Keenan admits when describing her position as a diplomat’s wife, that her life is a “bit of both” forced and voluntary “absence from home” (DB 12). The choice is not simply hers to make. She laments being second and having no distinct drive of her own.

It’s okay for the husbands—they go to their offices and work at more or less the same sort of thing whether they are in Jakarta or Japan. But we woman are left on our own, wildly casting around for some sort of role for ourselves which isn’t just playing bridge or golf, and having to fall back on our inner resources... (DB13).

While the setting changes for the husband, everything changes for the wife, who must find some new way to entertain herself. Sarah Macdonald, in Holy Cow! An Indian Adventure (2002), attests to this identity crisis regarding her loss of career, saying, “without a job or a focus I feel vulnerable and useless” (Macdonald 49). At home a career is a simple and straightforward way of identifying oneself, and without that career—or the role of mother as in Macdonald’s case—the expatriate is forced to re-evaluate who they say they are to others as well as to themselves.

While the sabbatical and bohemian expatriate narratives are tales of searching for something or searching for more, the trailing spouse narrative is one’s struggle to maintain an identity in the face of being narrowed to an appendage. The protagonist is challenged to create a life and maintain an identity in the shadow of other people’s choices and needs. Their main identity markers, like careers and social lives, have been stripped away and they must find a way to stay afloat in a new environment. The trailing spouse must fight the loss

of identity in a way that neither the sabbatical nor the bohemian expatriate narratives do. While the sabbatical narrative searches for self-expansion, and the bohemian narratives search for the authentic self, the trailing spouse searches for the anchor that keeps the self from being lost under new restrictions.

2. Isolation and Community: The benefits and downfalls at home and abroad

This section will continue by exploring the idea of Eva Hoffman's "safety net" from the previous chapter. This symbolic net can act as the metaphor for the effects of isolation and community on the expatriate. At home in one's native country, as well as during the experience of expatriation, isolation and community can serve very different purposes, depending on the perspective. For example, in either the home country or abroad the community can act as the safety net by catching the individual in times of need, keeping them from harm and providing a pathway or a purpose through involvement. On the other hand, that same net can be used to capture and hold an individual in place, to keep them from acting out of line, outside of prescribed and approved behaviours and thoughts. Isolation from the community can act on the one hand as an escape from the boundaries of that community, allowing one the freedom to do as one pleased. Again, on the other hand, isolation from the community can be a punishment, banishment for not staying within bounds, for not being what the community expected or desired.

These themes—of being on one side or the other of the "safety net"—can be found in the narratives of expatriates throughout the twentieth century, and aspects of those earlier expatriates' narrative reactions have shaped the narratives of today. This thesis aims to show that the themes of isolation and community as seen in the expatriate narratives spanning the decades of the twentieth century, can also be found within the expatriate

narratives of all three of the modern archetypes—sabbatical, bohemian, and trailing spouse narratives—as identified in this thesis, and that how those markers of isolation and community are addressed is what differentiates these groups.

The next three sections will briefly address the appearance of the themes of isolation and community within the expatriate narratives spanning from the 1920's and 1930's, to the narratives from the 40's and 50's, and finally the narratives of the 60's. The reasons for expatriation and the narrative reactions to themes of isolation and community from these time periods will then be briefly related to the modern archetypes before those connections are then more deeply excavated in individual chapters relating to each archetype.

3. Expatriate Narratives from the 1920's and 1930's: The Inter-War Period

Reasons for expatriation in the enduring narratives of the 20's and 30's often related to the perceived position one held on the spectrum from isolation to community at home, which affected how they perceived, or sought to alter, a new position on that same scale once abroad. Donald Pizer, in American Expatriate Writing and the Paris Moment: Modernism and Place (1996), outlined the expatriate experience as follows:

Reduced to its most fundamental level, the expatriate or self-exile state of mind is compounded out of the interrelated conditions of the rejection of a homeland and the desire for and acceptance of an alternative place. The world one has been bred in is perceived to suffer from intolerable inadequacies and limitations; another world seems to be free of these failings and to offer a more fruitful way of life.²²

While the initial focus is on the changing of place, the ultimate goal is the changing of worlds, which indicates all the associations connected to a place, such as family, friends, memories, community—all the things that populate and make a specific place home. One

²² Donald Pizer, American Expatriate Writing and the Paris Moment: Modernism and Place 1996 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997) p.1.

place holds associations perceived as limiting: a community that does not accept, a family that does not love or nurture, duties and responsibilities that one has not asked for. Another location appears to offer no such restrictions or limitation but instead offers opportunity.

Henry Miller, in Tropic of Cancer (1934), writes of Paris as a neutral element that must be put to use, good or ill use being a matter of perspective, and that it is what one brings to Paris that must be either violently faced or gently nurtured. He writes:

Of itself Paris initiates no dramas. They are begun elsewhere. Paris is simply an obstetrical instrument that tears the living embryo from the womb and puts it in the incubator. Paris is the cradle of artificial births. Rocking here in the cradle each one slips back into his soil: one dreams back to Berlin, New York, Chicago, Vienna, Minsk. Vienna is never more Vienna than in Paris. Everything is raised to apotheosis.²³

The new location simply brings forth the issues one experienced in the home environment, the self that cannot ultimately be escaped. The place acts as the incubator, the artificial environment in which one can hatch, understand and break through the shell of the dramas begun elsewhere and give birth to a new self, or where one can fester and fail to learn by getting lost in old ways heightened by the strangeness of a new place. Jake Barnes echoes this sentiment, saying to Robert Cohn in The Sun Also Rises (1926): “You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.”²⁴ The place might change, but the self that one must confront is still the same self. This recognition of expatriation, as not just moving from one geographical location to another but as a journey of self-recognition within new contexts, leads to the idea that one must be willing to examine the self one carries abroad, a theme carried through in the sabbatical expatriate narratives of today.

²³ Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer 1934 (London: Penguin Classics, 2015) p.23.

²⁴ Ernest Hemingway, Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises 1926 (London: Arrow Books, 2004) p.10.

The lack of a nurturing creative community in America at the turn of the century created a sense of isolation compared to the city of light, “The image of Paris” that “aptly renders the intellectual openness and intensity that earlier generations of Americans abroad had associated with the city” (Pizer 12). The way to remedy this was to be “where the twentieth century was” as Stein said, to be physically a part of the new burgeoning world of art and literature.²⁵ Craig Monk, in Writing the Lost Generation (2008), reports “that expatriates like Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein left their country in the early years of the last century precisely because of a paucity of indigenous creative activity, as they judged it.”²⁶ Artists felt that America was not offering them the opportunities to succeed or to experiment with their art that moving abroad might give them. Pizer critiques one of Stein’s early stories, “The Good Anna” (1909), as a critique of America:

...Dominated by an ethos in which the principal commitments are to work, money, and self-discipline (especially in sexual matters), with these constituting both godliness and community worthiness. Many of course fail to live up to the expectations of the ethos, but the expectations—the belief that such commitments constitute the “good” life—pass unchallenged.²⁷

If one does not believe in the party line, in “work, money and self-discipline”, then one is stifled and denied their version of the “good” life. In order to pursue one’s happiness, to not have one’s ideas or beliefs censored by their communities, one needed to leave America.

The expatriates of the early twentieth century set out to Paris, the city Stein recognized as capable of assimilating “the unconventional without jeopardizing its traditional character”²⁸ in order to find and create their own artistic community and at the

²⁵ Quoted by J.G. Kennedy in Imagining Paris: Exile, Writing, and American Identity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) p.43.

²⁶ Monk, Craig, Writing the Lost Generation: Expatriate Autobiography and American Modernism (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008) p.3.

²⁷ Pizer p.3.

²⁸ Kennedy p.43

same time to challenge the ideologies that kept them from creating the work they wanted to create and living the lives they wanted to live at home. The sense of the “creative upheaval” taking place in Paris’s art world was further indication that America was lacking the creative spirit that France was clearly fostering.²⁹ Windy Counsell Petrie, in her article “Gertrude Atherton’s Europe: Portal or Looking Glass?” quotes Atherton as saying, “Freedom was ‘essential to any artist...and is to be found only through an open mind and a wide and varying horizon.’”³⁰ Going to Paris to join the expatriate community opened one’s horizons and secured that freedom. Writing about that community became a way to legitimate oneself by including one’s name with the other well-known writers of the time as being part of, at least, a geographical scene. Monk states that, “Indeed, expatriate Americans with little creative affiliation to developing appreciations of modernism forged their connections with the fledgling movement by emphasizing the proximity to its most storied European locus.”³¹ Monk considers the autobiography of little known writer Braving Imbs who used his invitation to Gertrude Stein’s salons as a way to write himself more firmly into her exclusive club.³² It was a way for “lesser writers” to reaffirm the sense that they had “an insight that they believed their contemporaries back home simply did not possess.”³³ And as it was important to maintain the idea that expatriation bestowed something upon the expatriate that those left behind would never quite know. Including oneself in the tradition was a way to justify expatriation through inclusion with the creative element one longed to be compared to.

²⁹ Monk p.3

³⁰ Ferda Asya (ed.), *American Writers in Europe: 1850 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.55.

³¹ Monk p.96

³² Monk p.97

³³ Monk p.96

In order to defend “the concept of a generation itself as inherent to the justification of expatriation in the 1920’s”, Monk cites Kay Boyle’s revised edition of Robert McAlmon’s 1938 autobiography, Being Geniuses Together. Monk argues that Boyle included her own story of an inclusive and coherent community as an antidote to McAlmon’s refusal “to draw the self-conscious connections essential for defining a single community of writers” (Monk 150) because he saw himself as apart, “as a loner, prowling from engagement to engagement without forging meaningful connections” (Monk 151). Boyle wanted to promote the reputation and importance of the community that McAlmon did not necessarily feel a part of. The two sides of isolation and community come together under the ironic title, with Boyle’s goal being to show the community as a positive element in her time abroad as well as to prove its importance overall.

For Monk, autobiographies of writers in Paris in the 20’s and 30’s often had ulterior motives other than just joining a generational club, but instead related to “a desire to set the record straight, more than nostalgia” (Monk 140). This record might need to be rewritten, as a response to another autobiography perhaps or by showing oneself as superior to the community based on isolation and authentic—unaffected by community censorship—production. If the whole point was to come to Europe to work in an environment that was “best organized for a writer to write in that there is”³⁴ then the easiest way to judge where one stood in regards to the expatriate community was on the grounds of whether or not the community was helping or hindering one’s ability to produce or reach one’s goals.

³⁴ Ernest Hemingway, A Movable Feast (London: Arrow Books, 2004) p.108.

Various goals abound in regard to expatriation, as many of the essays in American Writers in Europe: 1850 to the Present (2013) attests³⁵ though Ferda Asya's introductory discussion of Edith Wharton and "intellectual independence" stands out when thinking of writers such as Stein and Hemingway who specifically expatriated in order to benefit their writing. Asya uses Wharton's emphasis on engagement with other cultures in order to cultivate what Asya calls "intellectual independence", which she holds to be a shared and valued attribute of expatriate authors, stating:

That a true comprehension of one's own country entails a transcultural perspective, which one is able to acquire by living in other countries and developing an affinity with their people, customs, and literatures. Such an experience inculcates in one an impartial critical perspicacity with which one can determine the level of progress and degree of refinement of one's country in the universal social and cultural spectrum (Asya 1).

The focus being on joining the community and studying every aspect of it, Wharton and Asya believe that digging deeper and investing oneself into the new community is the path to follow if one is ever fully to understand oneself, one's homeland, and where and how one fits between the two. This is precisely the position taken in the sabbatical expatriate narrative.

Edith Wharton's 1913 novel, The Custom of the County, gives a prime example of how living purely for the veneer of life—of how staying on the surface of a culture, whether

³⁵ Ann Beebe, associate professor of English at the University of Texas at Tyler writes in "God Permits the Tares to Grow With the Wheat": E.D.E.N. Southworth in Great Britain, 1859-1862', of Southworth fleeing to England to protect her writer's income from a husband who abandoned her and then returned to claim her property, which, as a married woman in the 1800s, she had no legal right to.

³⁵ See Jenny Glennon's essay "Toward a Brighter Vision of 'American Ways and Their Meaning': Edith Wharton and the Americanization of Europe After the First World War" for a discussion of Wharton's political involvement in the war effort; and "'Homeland Strangeness': American Poets in Spain, 1936-1939" by Robin Voglzang for a look at how the media and expatriate poets played a role in creating what was known as The Poets' War.

one's own or another—would ultimately keep one from the community, as well as away from the lesser desired self-understanding, so desperately strived for.

Wharton's main character in The Custom of the Country, Undine Spragg, was a big fish in a small town until she moved with her parents to New York City in an effort to gain "social benefit" and the ability to cross "those sacred thresholds" of the upper class.³⁶ Undine wanted more than what her hometown had to offer though she found it difficult to enter into the New York circles at first, and when she finally did make a place for herself she did everything she could not to lose it. The circle she sought to enter spent time in Europe during the hottest summer months and Undine was desperate to remain within sight during those months, as this particular social circle practiced an out of sight, out of mind policy. Though "the little New York world that was reforming itself in London and Paris" was full of vain, egotistical, greedy, and self-serving socialites, it is nonetheless Undine Spragg's desire to be "in it" (COC 7), to gain their approval, because that approval "refurbished that image of herself in other minds which was," unfortunately for Undine, "her only notion of self-seeing" (COC 279). To be left behind when New York was empty, or alone in a French chateau, was to lose her place, to be out of the loop. She had no designs on Paris other than what her being in Paris meant to others and described her husband wanting her to come back home from Paris as his wanting "to drag her back to bondage" (COC 198). For Undine, isolation was prison.

On the other hand, Undine's first husband, Ralph Marvell, showed ideas of Europe that correspond more to Wharton's own ideas of gaining intellectual independence. Ralph took Undine to Italy for the first time, for their honeymoon, choosing "the summer: so that

³⁶ Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country, 1913 (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) p.11. From here on all citations will appear in text as (COC).

we could have it all to ourselves” (COC 103). He thought of Europe as a way to get away and recharge. For Ralph, being in Europe was inspiring; “the Sieneese air was not only breathable but intoxicating” (COC 99) and “he still secretly hoped that...his real vocation might declare itself” based on the inspiration he found in “those moments when the accumulated impressions of life converge on heart and brain, elucidating, enlacing each other, in a mysterious confusion of beauty” as he lay beneath the Italian sky. Ralph found the solitude of his summer in Europe, the isolation from the crowds, inspiring and opening, compared to Undine feeling the sting of isolation. In regard to Wharton’s intellectual independence, Ralph held out hope that he, and Europe, might open Undine to life beyond the social ladder; “the task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience” (COC 105), though he was ultimately unsuccessful because “a crowd was what she wanted” (COC 104). However, Ralph and Europe were not enough to expand Undine’s mind and her only goal remained to be a part of the correct social circles. Wharton shows two sides in her novel, the side that finds isolation to be stifling and community to be self-affirming (possibly aiding in self-delusion) and the side that shows isolation to be necessary to creative energy and the expansion of the mind.

Ernest Hemingway’s posthumously published memoir of his time in Paris in the 1920s, A Moveable Feast (1964), acts as both a record of success as well as showing how its author favoured isolation from his peers in order to achieve that success. In the opening of the memoir the reader is given a sense that Hemingway came to Paris because he “had already seen the end of fall come through boyhood, youth and young manhood, and in one place you could write about it better than in another.”³⁷ He was ready to step away from

³⁷ Ernest Hemingway, A Movable Feast (London: Arrow Books, 2004) p.3. From here on all citations will be in text as (AMF).

the associations of childhood and youth, and see what those associations meant to him by examining them from a distance. "That was called transplanting yourself...and it could be as necessary with people as with other sorts of growing things" (AMF 3). In order to achieve growth and expand beyond the limits of childhood and youth, Hemingway felt it necessary to seek new soil, to gain new perspectives through geographical movement. Pizer suggests that Hemingway used movement through the city of Paris to develop "a trope of a world of multiple contexts for the writer and of the writer's freedom to select the ones he desires" (11). Hemingway echoes the freedom gained through the larger geographical move to Paris by constantly moving within the city itself and movement becomes a means to fulfilment.

But Hemingway mainly walks alone, or with his wife Hadley. Monk highlights that "the threat" to Hemingway's writing "always came from some acquaintance who could disturb him with a simple, 'Hi, Hem. What are you trying to do?'" (Monk 142) He needed isolation for the sake of his work. Hemingway disparaged his community, felt Gertrude Stein could only be kept happy if she were "published" and "recognized" (AMF 10-11), and states "I cannot remember Gertrude Stein ever speaking well of any writer who had not written favourably about her work or done something to advance her career" (AMF 17). He did not want to bow down to Stein's ego in order to be on the top rung of her social ladder, criticizing her self-created community as exclusive because it was based solely on her opinions and vanity. He called Ford Maddox Ford out for having bad breath and was annoyed that Ford had made him miss the changing of the light while sitting at a café (AMF 48). As for F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway thought of the way he wrote and edited his stories for money as "whoring" (AMF 89). Hemingway was not impressed with the idea of doing anything simply for praise or money. Hemingway had the desire to be authentic and produce true art rather than simply producing for money. He had a one-foot-in-one-foot-

out attitude towards his community, where he could not escape interaction with it but recognized the capacity of the community to indulge in inauthenticity.

Pizer reads Hemingway's portrayal of his peers as a way for Hemingway to relate "each figure to a mythic Paris of sustenance and potency," and for Hemingway to sort them "into figures who contributed, by their aid and example, to his development and those who provided at most instructive instances of a failure to develop" (Pizer 20). JG Kennedy believes that Hemingway, "flaunting his own work ethic, he ridiculed those 'posing as artist'" (Kennedy 85) as a way to set himself apart from those who drank constantly at the cafés while he was whiling away the hours with his "one true sentence" (AMF 7). In this antisocial memoir of his time abroad Monk believes Hemingway refutes "accounts of a cohesive generation abroad" (Monk 145). Hemingway certainly works to avoid people, though he is never short a drinking partner, and he makes sure to be clear he does most of his producing when left to his own devices, eschewing the community in favour of isolation.

6. Expatriate narratives of the 1940's and 50's: The Post-War Period

Expatriation during the post-war era continued to be a combination of the rejection of one's homeland and the desire for and acceptance of another place.³⁸ Many Americans sought out the perceived freedoms offered in Europe, which they felt they could not find at home. George Monteriro, in his article "Expatriate Life Away from Paris" (2001), states that "perhaps the greatest attraction Europe held for Americans...in the 1920s was its promise that place—Europe offered them the opportunity to be free: from social restrictions and inhibitions—what they considered to be a repressive Puritanism that curbed their sexuality,

³⁸ Pizer p.1

outlawed their drinking, and stifled their art.”³⁹ This continues to be a reason far beyond the roaring 20s and the depressed 30s, however, the post-war period presented more sinister reasons for leaving America, as well as the reactions to expatriation as found in the ensuing narratives. For African Americans in particular, “the lure of Paris continued into the 1940s and ‘50s as a place of shelter from racism, prejudice, and segregation at home, including writers such as Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin, and jazzmen Sidney Bechet and Bud Powell.”⁴⁰ What was not on offer at home, acceptance as individuals aside from being artists of colour, they sought to find abroad.

James Campbell’s Paris Interzone (1994) tells the story of multiple expatriates living and working in Paris between 1946-1960. There were many different groups of expatriates that mixed, mingled, and kept to themselves as professional rivalry, opposing views on moral and immoral sexual behaviour, as well as Cold War tensions began to take sway after the end of the Second World War. In the States “people in the entertainment or literary worlds were called to answer questions by McCarthy’s committees” which caused rumours of writers unable to work based on their political leanings (Campbell 14, 101). Paris was an avenue of escape, though the air of paranoia followed those who did move abroad as “the CIA had a large and ever-increasing presence in Europe, Paris in particular, and was already spying on the activities of troublesome expatriates” (Campbell 76). “It was not unknown for Americans in Europe to have their passports confiscated when attempting to renew them, if they had been openly critical of US policy” (Campbell 108). With racial and political tensions in the air, trust comes with higher stakes.

³⁹ George Monteiro, “Expatriate Life Away From Paris”, *Antioch Review*, 2001 Summer, Vol. 59(3), pp.587-607.

⁴⁰ Barry Miles, The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso in Paris, 1957-1963 (London: Atlantic Books, 2003) p.4.

For black American expatriates Europe was less about what they would find there, as what they hoped to escape from in the States, the “social restrictions” more than simply “inhibitions”. For example, James Campbell quotes James Baldwin in Paris Interzone as saying “I didn’t go to Paris...I left New York.”⁴¹ In A Warning to America: History, Politics and the Problem of Identity in the Fiction and Non-Fiction of James Baldwin, James Miller compares Baldwin to the white Americans in Pizer’s study and concludes that while authors like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, and John Dos Passos, “confident of their national and cultural capital, had the privilege of being able to choose which aspects of American society they wished to reject,” for writers like Baldwin, “As far as he was concerned, America rejected him. Getting out seemed a matter of survival.”⁴² Paris offered many black American expatriates the opportunity to “lead the sort of normal life they felt was denied them in the United States,” and the chance to not be immediately deemed second class by the fact of their skin colour (Miller 50).

Ultimately for Baldwin, the expatriate experience should be revelatory of the hypocrisy of American social norms because it creates a neutral space in the sense that both “white and black Americans exist in a curious void where their normal, socially conditioned behaviour is suspended, absent as they are from the segregated mentality of the United States” (Miller 58). Once the socially decreed moral and behavioural norms could be left behind, Baldwin hoped that black and white Americans might begin to recognize each other as belonging to the same nation, and rather than fighting against one another could begin to work together for common goals. His hope for the expatriate in Europe is to find “the terms

⁴¹ James Campbell, Paris Interzone: Richard Wright, LOLITA, Boris Vian and others on the Left Bank 1946-1960 1994 (London: Vintage, 2001) p.27.

⁴² James Miller, A Warning to America: History, Politics and the Problem of Identity in the Fiction and Non-Fiction of James Baldwin (London: Kings College). p.50.

on which he is related to his country, and to the world,” and it is the expatriate’s duty to interrogate America’s past—a past which “has created an entirely unprecedented people, with a unique and individual past”—and not turn “our faces so resolutely away from it” but demand “from it what it has to give.”⁴³ But he had his doubts.

Baldwin’s 1956 novel, Giovanni’s Room, is the story of a white American named David, a latent homosexual, who expatriates to Europe as a means of escape from what he perceives as community and family expectations that he could no longer pretend to live up to: “I wearied of the motion...of the joyless seas of alcohol...of the blunt, bluff, hearty, and totally meaningless friendships, wearied of wandering through the forest of desperate women...of the work which fed me only in the most brutally literal sense.”⁴⁴ There was nothing in his home location or community to sustain him—true friendships or options for love that were acceptable to his community—and in fact he describes his father attempting to comfort him after a terrible car crashing saying, “And all the time he was stroking my face with that handkerchief, smothering me” (GR 23). To make a mistake or put oneself at risk of not living up to his father’s standards, was to be smothered in the name of parental guilt based on failed expectations: “I haven’t done anything wrong have I?” his father wanted to know (GR 23). The pressure his father puts on David is a result of his father seeing David as an extension of himself as opposed to his own individual person with needs and desires that have no relationship to his father. The only way for David to find a world that would not smother but nurture, a world that might not deny him for his desires but allow him to “as we say in America...find myself” (GR 25), was to leave his own behind, to seek out “a foreign

⁴³ James Baldwin, ‘A Question of Identity’ in Baldwin: Collected Essays (New York: The Library of America, 1998) p.100.

⁴⁴ James Baldwin, Giovanni’s Room 1956 (London: Penguin Books, 2001) p.25. From here on citations will be in text as follows (GR).

sky, with no-one to watch, no penalties attached” under which he could attempt to encounter not just the “touch of another world, “ but “contact” that would bring “light” and dispel the shame he felt for not connecting with his father or his life at home (GR 57). Like expatriates before and after him, David is seeking freedom to find or build a life based on the freedom to pick and choose how he would like to live.

However, while David professes the wish to find himself, he goes on to qualify that “I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home” (GR 25). This indicates that David became aware of the fact that just because one leaves their country behind, does not mean they leave themselves behind. Miller argues this realization as being a key revelation of Baldwin’s own experience; “Paris made him realize it was impossible to separate ‘exterior’ socio-political forces from ‘interior’ psychological pressures” (Miller 47). David goes on to struggle with the baggage he carried with him from America—echoing Jake Barnes telling Cohn “You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another,”—attempting to act against his social conditioning, and ultimately returning home, because he could not, or would not, face what it would take to change who America had made him.

Stephanie Elizabeth Wells writes of homosexuality, gender bending, and how expatriate texts of the early and mid 20th century show the possibilities of becoming othered based on national identity in her dissertation “Expatriate Fictions: Sexual Identity, National Identity, and the Imaginary World in 20th Century American Expatriate Literature.” Wells’ study focuses on the link between sexuality and nationality and how it is highlighted through expatriation, allowing the individual to attempt to reinvent, or suspend, their identity and possibly reach what she calls a third space of the knowledgeable, though still

othered and novel, resident of a foreign country.⁴⁵ She states, in regard to David's expatriation, "much to his surprise he finds that the freedom he finds there to face himself and his sexuality is too liberating for him to manage. Thinking he wants to 'find himself,' he learns that what he wanted all along is to lose himself and avoid facing who he really is" (6-7).⁴⁶ In David's attempt to invest himself in creating a life with Giovanni the sense of novelty begins to wear down and the reality of what his investment in this man could cost him begins to weigh on him. Running to Europe forced David to confront the reasons for his flight in a more direct way than had he stayed at home and continued to simply fantasize about the perfect life he might have. David confesses at the beginning of the novel, "nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom" (GR 11). Following the mandates of others, not thinking for oneself or attempting to start a new life, would be far easier than standing up and making decisions for oneself, and taking the consequences of those decisions whatever they might be. David carries the thing he wishes to escape with him, because he cannot escape himself, his desires, and the social, moral, and political contexts that are inbuilt in his worldview. In the end, he finds that he does not want the responsibility, does not want to keep his eyes open to the new world he helped create, decides to abandon his experiment and return home, leaving Giovanni's life in ruins. This is indicative of Baldwin's hopes for the expat—to confront and reform one's inbuilt worldview—and of his doubts that the expatriate is capable of such a thing.

7. Expatriate Narratives of late 1950's and 1960's: The Beat Generation in Europe

⁴⁵ Stephanie Elizabeth Wells, "Expatriate Fictions: Sexual Identity, National Identity, and the Imaginary World in 20th Century American Expatriate Literature (2000) p.43.

⁴⁶ Wells p.6-7.

Allen Ginsberg arrived in Paris to the news that he was famous at home, as his poem “Howl” went to court in an obscenity trial in California in 1957.⁴⁷ This starts the Beat Generation off on a far different note than that of the Lost Generation, unable to gain recognition at home and hoping to find it abroad. It also sets the scene for how the Beats were not necessarily interested in following any particular tradition but rather in making up their own. “The Beats went to Paris to be free not from racism—they were primarily from white middle-class college-educated backgrounds—but to escape the conformism and Puritanism of America after the war.”⁴⁸ Norman Mailer described the tension that resulted from the fear of nuclear war, a powerful sense of purposelessness when “the psyche was subjected ...to the intolerable anxiety that death being causeless, life was causeless as well.”⁴⁹ The hipster’s reaction to this was to have a life of “experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention.”⁵⁰ The goal was to be free, go where one wanted, when one wanted, sleep with whoever one wanted, and create art in the process that reflected the breaking of rules, the freedom to follow a thought wherever it may lead.

⁴⁷ James Campbell, *Paris Interzone* p.242.

⁴⁸ Barry Miles, *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso in Paris, 1957-1963* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003) p.4. Miles also makes a point of saying on page 68 that “The Beat Generation was virtually an all-male society wherein women had no role except as wives or ‘chicks’. Their experience as wives was generally a disaster.” Women represented too much responsibility and something to be regarded as an experience rather than getting tied down by one. As an example, on pages 92-93, Mailer recounts the story of William Burroughs accidentally shooting and killing his wife; and on p 129 Gregory Corso is reported as saying he essentially used women for their money.

⁴⁹ Norman Mailer, *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster* (1957), http://www.academia.edu/download/33063177/1353950503Mailer_WhiteNegro.pdf p.277.

⁵⁰ Mailer pp.277-8

While in Paris, the Beats lived together, worked together, and slept together in what became known as the Beat Hotel, at 9, rue Git-le-Coer. The hotel was cheap and dirty and Madame Rachou enjoyed renting to artists and let them do whatever they liked and it was close to the Olympia Press building where they could sell pornographic novels to Maurice Girodias to make a bit of money.⁵¹ Barry Miles's, The Beat Hotel (2000), tells the story of a constant coming and going of people, of collaboration and shared failures and triumphs. "New people appeared all the time as the growing notoriety of the Beats caused like-minded people to seek them out" (Miles 96). Miles notes the constant letter writing and Ginsberg's vast network of writers, poets, editors and publishers and how Ginsberg "was indefatigable in his promotion of their work" (Miles 41). Were it not for the incredible bond these men shared, whether together or apart, they would not have created such a movement, but together they appeared to be a tour de force.

Yet, aside from the occasional foray into the world of French art and artists, the Beats formed a separate society in Paris living apart from the French Paris that surrounded them. Miles described them as having "no involvement with French culture and the issues of the day, nor were they restricted by the rules with which the French lived, simply because they were ignorant of them" (Miles 19). And being in a foreign county made it easier to stay separate because "it was a foreign culture and most of the messages went unheeded" as they didn't speak the language (Miles 65). Keeping to themselves, creating a self-referential "micro-climate" was a way of staying outside the establishment, to pursue their art with as little interference as possible (Miles 65). When Ginsburg went back to America in 1958, the Beats became even more exclusive. While Ginsburg was happy to include anyone and had

⁵¹ Miles p.16 and p.20

“an enormous reservoir of tolerance for antisocial behaviour and craziness” (Miles 53), Burroughs “preferred an anonymous, invisible presence” (Miles 160), which saw him more and more cut off from the outside world.

In some ways, the Beats were everything Baldwin didn't like about the white American expatriate. They didn't attempt to integrate, learn the language, were more interested in drugs and cutting up magazines. Miller believes that “The Beats' enthusiasm for sheer experience, with its madcap energy and lack of discrimination or consideration is, in Baldwin's opinion, another means of avoiding the complexity of actual American life” (Miller 169). And as their living situation in the Beat Hotel would state, they avoided materialism and the consumer culture that resulted in the responsibilities and duty they were evading. But for Baldwin, once again, one's choices must be examined, and if they wanted to throw away an entire social structure, he wanted more examination of what created the structure to begin with in order to understand the need to undermine.

Referring back to Norman Mailer's description of this new generation in his 1957 essay “The White Negro”, as people wanting to have a life of “experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention,”⁵² certainly described the Beats, who risked their physical and mental health chasing new experiences, such as drugs and fast living. Drugs and sex appear frequently in current bohemian expatriate narratives as well as the attempt to rack up experiences, live in the enormous possibility of the present while attempting to shed the past and avoid the future.

⁵² Mailer pp.277-8.

On the whole, however, the rebellious and often illegal activities of the Beats are no longer so. Being a freelance artist rather than a corporate drone is no longer a new idea and being openly homosexual is no longer illegal. The Beats helped pave the way, so that their transgressive behaviour might one day be considered normal. This normalcy leaves contemporary bohemian expatriate narratives to contemplate the expatriate's ability to participate sincerely in rebellion, as displayed in Ben Lerner's Leaving the Atocha Station (2011). Though the protagonist, Adam is a self-centred poet who wishes his work capable of translating great events into passionate action and feeling, multiple instances see Adam become aware of how out of place he feels in the political happenings of Spain: "Later I learned that, while I was in the park the entire city had emptied into the streets for a moment of silence without me" (LAS 120). "Teresa and Arturo and Rafa were chanting, so I chanted too, but my voice sounded off to me, affected, and I worried it was conspicuous, that it failed to blend. I couldn't be the only one not chanting, so I mouthed the words" (LAS 123). Adam is in the city, near the train station when a bomb goes off, but somehow he manages not to be a part of the action, to miss the moments of importance or to be fully able to lend his voice to the cause, because while he is an outsider—like the Beats—he does not have a true cause of his own to stand behind.

8. The Modern Texts

This thesis will show that it is the attitude, reasons, and reactions to expatriation that defines a narrative as belonging to one of the three categories: sabbatical, bohemian, or trailing spouse expatriate narratives. This is a relatively small sampling of narratives, however, with more research, it may be that these categories could first be viewed as genres, with each narrative type often corresponding to a narrative style: the sabbatical

narrative often being presented as a memoir, while the bohemian narrative could be described as autofiction, while the trailing spouse narratives can range between memoir and pure fiction. Whether the author is presenting themselves as the story's protagonist or not, reflects the possible depths of acclimatization reached by the expatriate.

At its simplest the sabbatical expatriate narratives tend to be memoirs, such as Frances Mayes's Under the Tuscan Sun (1998), focused largely on joining the community, showing complete faith in the system of expatriation and that a new home can be built anywhere as long as one throws themselves into the process fully. The bohemian expatriate narratives, wavering between autobiography and fiction—autofiction—presents the most doubt and scepticism regarding the expatriate lifestyle. As Ben Lerner shows, in Leaving the Atocha Station (2011), there is doubt about the authenticity of life abroad compared to that left behind, as well as a wavering between believing in the nurturing aspect of community and the rejection of that same community. The trailing spouse expatriate narrative can vary in form from memoirs—like Brigid Keenan's Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse (2005)—to fiction—such as Janice Y.K. Lee's The Expatriates (2016). These narratives express more doubt in the concept of home abroad and tend to consider the country of origin as the 'real life' to which one will eventually return, though these narratives can vary from throwing one's self into the adopted culture to the desperate need to hold onto the culture left behind.

Individualized focuses—such as searching for a house to buy, learning local history, writing poetry, finding jobs, drugs, or religion—are all clues to what type of categorical journey the author/narrator is on and what he or she hopes to achieve through expatriation as well as how the community will play a role in their journey. The questions raised through their explorations, as well as the questions not asked, must be examined to determine the

depth each expatriate narrative will reach. To what extent do the narrative categories examine the life left behind in terms of their reasons for expatriating as well as questioning what “intolerable inadequacies and limitations” were hoping to be escaped? To what extent do the different categories question the “legend” which “operates to place all of the inconveniences endured by the foreigner, to say nothing of the downright misery which is the lot of many of the natives, in the gentle glow of the picturesque, and the absurd” (Baldwin Question 94), or do they work to “cushion...against the shock of reality” (Baldwin Question 93)? And to what extent do the categories question expatriation as a form of appropriation, looking elsewhere for a way of life and simply adopting it as one’s own without complete understanding of the social and historical institutions that have created the appropriated aspect of that culture.

Chapter 3: The Sabbatical Expatriate Narrative

1) A Summary

To review, the sabbatical expatriate narrative is often narrated by an older, more well-travelled person who records either a year spent traveling—away from normal working life—or the continuous return to a second home—such as teachers travelling in the summer months. These narratives often employ a pastoral or even comic mode of storytelling, detailing the minor trials and tribulations as they immerse themselves in local culture and attempt to become a local (or part-time local) in the process. These stories tend to be romantic versions of life abroad in small picturesque European towns where life is perceived as a continuous vacation. There is a sense of joy and the embracing of the new and different within these narratives, a sense of adventure and a “try anything” once attitude.⁵³

Frances Mayes’s memoir, Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy, is exemplary of the sabbatical expatriate narrative, documenting five years in Mayes’s life in which she and her partner, Ed, buy and renovate a house in the small Tuscan town of Cortona. They manage to make it through the renovation process, which includes plenty of comic construction blunders and hilarity⁵⁴ with patience and a zest to learn and participate. As they become comfortable on their small slice of land, they begin the process of exploring the surrounding areas, eating and drinking their way across the country, stopping at every Etruscan tomb site and hill town along the way (UTS 169). In the end Mayes’s story is one of

⁵³ Frances Mayes, Under the Tuscan Sun, p.12.

⁵⁴ Mayes goes through multiple construction episodes including throwing hissy fits (p.65), unearthing a fresco on the kitchen wall (p.93), finding a plumber had written a phone number on said fresco when arriving at Christmas to find their home a wreck (p.105), ending up with hot water toilets (p.112), and finally having a bucket of wet cement dropped on Mayes’ head through a hole in the ceiling (p.264).

acceptance and the attempt to understand another culture through the celebration of its past and the creation of something new within it.

Mayes and her partner Ed intended to plant themselves within the landscape, to build within and around themselves a place to call home, only to be surprised at the level to which they succeeded. She ends the book with the statement that:

Cortona is home. We did not intend to make such a spiritual shift but it happened, we have a tribe of Italian friends and everyone we know there is vividly singular. Our neighbors are as close as family. What luck—the intense sense of community that we once observed in this small hilltown now includes us. We are comfortable in a wider, deeper sense than I ever dreamed (UTS 293).

Her memoir is essentially the evidence Mayes puts forward to verify their success in their view of expatriation: shifting from *stranieri*—foreigners—to having their renovated home—*Bramasole*—painted and “hanging on a restaurant wall,” a stop on Corona’s tourist trail (UTS 294). Not only were they accepted, they became prized. They have been included in the community and the memoir outlines Mayes’s experiences working creatively within the confines and difficulties of a foreign culture, language, and market to restore an ancient structure. It is her story of meeting, interacting with, and succeeding in winning over the residents and construction contractors, of ultimately needing an extra-long dining table to accommodate the flow of guests—all the locals and foreigners that want to know and spend time with them—constantly in attendance. Her book records her attempt “to live another kind of life” (UTS 12) where she tries “being extant in another version” (UTS 281). She wanted to know what side of herself would emerge, what aspects would be recovered, and what her life would look like if she were to live it in Italy. Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy is the creative result of one expatriate’s search for inclusion within an isolated foreign community.

From the outset, Mayes is an exemplary protagonist of a sabbatical expatriate narrative as she is a professor with the confidence of many years of travel deciding to take her summers in Italy to restore a home.⁵⁵ While Mayes summers in her own home, others' positions vary slightly: Peter Mayle and his wife, in A Year in Provence (2000), though owning their home in France, are retired; Michael Sadler, in An Englishman in Paris: L'éducation continentale (2003), is single, was granted a yearlong sabbatical during which he rented a Parisian apartment; and Alice Steinbach, in Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman (2001), is also alone, and "temporarily jumps ship, so to speak," from her life as a journalist when she takes a year to travel to Paris, London, Oxford and around Italy.⁵⁶ Together they share flexible careers, time and money to spare, and stable lives that they are willing to take the chance of upending by leaving home. A recent divorce shook the stability of Mayes home life, giving her an opportunity to re-evaluate what she wants from her life. She outlines her situation:

When the flying fur from the divorce settled, I had found myself with a grown daughter, a fulltime university job (after years of part-time teaching), a modest securities portfolio, and an entire future to invent. Although divorce was harder than a death, still I felt oddly returned to myself after many years in a close family. I had the urge to examine my life in another culture and move beyond what I knew (UTS 25).

Mayes is a mother, but the day-to-day demands of small children have passed. When she shed the role of wife, she left behind any responsibility she may have felt towards her

⁵⁵ In multiple instances she references her other travels: multiple years spent searching for a house in Italy (p.25); summers off the coast of Georgia, in Majorca, San Miguel del Allende, and Santa Fe (p.28); memories of trips to Innsbruck, Cuzco, Puerto Vallarta, and the Yucatan (p.153).

⁵⁶ Peter Mayle, A Year in Provence (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Michael Sadler, An Englishman in Paris: L'éducation continentale (London: Pocket Books, 2003); Alice Steinbach, Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman (London: Bantam Books, 2003) p.13.

husband. She held a secure job, after years of hard work in less secure roles, which provided free time and money to finance her new adventure. With her children grown, the divorce gave her a reason to ask what she wanted to fill her time with. A close family had separated, a community dispersed, and the opportunity to choose a direction based on her own needs was at hand. With the time she gained—with age, with the summers off in Italy, with years passing after the divorce—she was able to give herself a chance to breathe and rediscover aspects of herself that she had neglected over the years. Steinbach—who felt her “identity narrowing” solely into her role as a reporter—wonders, “What had happened...to the woman who loved art and jazz and the feeling that an adventure always lurked just ahead, around some corner?” (Steinbach 15). Both women felt constricted by their former roles and need to rediscover their neglected selves. As Mayes said, she was returned to herself when she was freed from her marriage, but she was also ready to take the opportunity to examine that neglected self as she moved forward. “Because I had ended a long marriage that was not supposed to end and was establishing a new relationship, this house quest felt tied to whatever new identity I would manage to forge” (UTS 25). Though her marriage had dissolved there was a sense of restoration and creation based in the physical restoration of the Italian villa as well as the sense of the strengthening relationship between Mayes and Ed as they struggle through and see out the restoration. “We will not have any children together but decide that this is the equivalent of having triplets” (UTS 111). Together they bring life to a house abandoned for thirty years, gladly shouldering the responsibility for its growth and upkeep for the foreseeable future.

Compared to the journey depicted in bohemian expatriate narratives—that of finding oneself through travel and experience—Mayes shows the position of the sabbatical expatriate narrative as the story of one already aware of the many identities they have

already inhabited and wishing “to live another kind of life...to go forward in our thinking” (UTS 12). Living an alternative life—even just part time—becomes a way to expand their identity, keep it from becoming narrowed by their current situations. One does not have a simple, or singular identity, but a layered self that incorporates all experience into the identity one has been in possession of the whole time.⁵⁷ For Steinbach expatriation offered the possibility to “stand back from these roles” as mother, journalist, and ex-wife, “and see who emerged” (17). She hoped to expand her sense of self by seeing who she is when she is no longer defining herself in terms of her relationships to others. Michael Sadler professed a childhood wonder of “who I might be if I could speak [French]” (6). He wishes to find out who he might be in another language. Because, as Mayes says, “At the taproot, to seek change probably always is related to the desire to enlarge the psychic place one lives in” (UTS 13). Expatriation, therefore, within the sabbatical expatriate narratives, is the catalyst for the enlargement of the self.

Mayes is a part of the tradition, or pattern, of writers such as Henry James and D.H. Lawrence, traveling to Italy and documenting their experiences.⁵⁸ Showing her desire to be connected—to the generations of people who lived everyday lives before her as well as to the previous generations of writers who have taken inspiration from the land and lives of Italy—Mayes walks towards her house in Cortona and sees “the section of Etruscan wall known as Bramasole. My House takes its name from the wall” (UTS 166). By virtue of her ownership of the house, Mayes has laid claim to this small brick of Etruscan history. She

⁵⁷ For a brief discussion of the relational identity see John Paul Eakin’s How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves, p.52 where Eakin outlines Jessica Benjamin’s theory of recognition as being central to the formation of identity.

⁵⁸D.H. Lawrence, D. H. Lawrence and Italy, ed. By Simonetta De Filippis, Paul Eggert, and Mara Kanins (London: Penguin Classics, 2007)

speculates that “the wall may have been part of a sun temple” (UTS 166). She prefers to dwell on possible ancient beliefs, wondering:

Who knows how old the name, indicating a yearning for sun might be? All summer the sun strikes the Etruscan wall directly at dawn. It wakes me up, too. Behind the pleasure and fresh beauty of sunrise, I detect an old and primitive response: the day has come again, no dark god swallowed it during the night. A sun temple seems the most logical kind anyone ever would build (UTS 166).

As old as the name might be, Mayes makes herself physically present in a moment that has taken place day after day for centuries, the sun hitting the wall at dawn, and ‘detects an old and primitive response’, her response to waking and witnessing the dawn over the wall, that she has lived to see the sun again. She understands how that feeling drives the worship of the new day and carries on customs that relate to the observance of the sun.

The same way Steinbach’s fantasy includes walking in the footsteps of the lost generation;⁵⁹ Mayes invokes Henry James, quoting his words as they walk the same path years apart. She says, “I take the same stroll and attempt the same mysterious act, to throw the powerful light of the long, long past into the light of the morning” (UTS 166-67). They both attempt to bring “proper perspective” (UTS 166) to the ancient past of the land around them. She admits that she was “drawn to the surface of Italy for its perched towns, the food, language and art” (UTS 268)—to the basic pleasures of pretty views, good food, good art, and a language challenge. But Mayes goes on to state “I was pulled also to its sense of lived life, the coexistence of times that somehow gives an aura of timelessness...” (UTS 268). Walking in the steps of Henry James and thinking about the people who built that Etruscan wall thousands of years ago, Mayes participates in the idea of coexisting or of pulling the past with her. She spends afternoons exploring local churches and reading books about the

⁵⁹ Steinbach p.17.

lives of Saints, contemplating their physical lives and how their remains end up displayed in those churches as holy relics (UTS 271). She finds them, like the Etruscan walls, intriguing because “They almost seem like memories somehow, the vertebrae of the Virgin, the toenail of San Marco” (UTS 271). Their bodies become talismans of the faith, “*where they put their awe*” (UTS 271), and how they choose to remember their history. Mayes recognizes the tendency to continue to look after, worship, something when it in return gives and nourishes. The church lasts through time because it is a repository, a place that houses the relics of the past so that those who come to see them, to obtain the sense of a bodily connection to the spiritual, will have faith to “Hold on; like these, have faith” (UTS 276). This is the same reason Mayes venerates the dirt and vines of her own garden for the fact that they continue to offer up gifts and sustenance to those who work them. These rituals are repeated because they yield results, whether wine or strengthened faith. “San Biago is a transubstantiated metaphor and a handful of dust in a wrought box. Its small keyhole reminds us of what we most want to be reminded of, *you are not out there alone*” (UTS 276). The same way that Mayes walks in James’s footsteps marvelling at the walls, to “attempt the same mysterious act; to throw the powerful light of the long, long past into the light of the morning” (UTS 167), Mayes enters the churches to experience the fact that the holy ground has stayed holy, that they stand, the way the old walls do, perhaps a relic of the past but the past made present nonetheless.

Every time Mayes digs in her garden and pulls out broken crockery, even a World War I memorial, she symbolically recalls Hemingway’s description of transplanting oneself in his memoir *A Moveable Feast*:

I had already seen the end of fall come through boyhood, youth and young manhood, and in one place you could write about it better than in another. That was

called transplanting yourself, I thought, and it could be as necessary with people as with other sorts of growing things (AMF 3).

Mayes's description of planting grape vines compares, but also complicates Hemingway's idea. She writes:

To bury the grape tendril in such a way that it shoots out new growth I recognize easily as a metaphor for the way life must change from time to time if we are to go forward in our thinking (UTS 12).

While Mayes has her hands in the dirt, and Hemingway's fingers are gripped round a drink and a pencil, they both take the act of movement for growth's sake as a necessity. "Every time I dig in the garden, I'm reminded of how many have gone before me on the land" (UTS 172). Moving locations, or moving dirt, brings up the past and allows it to be examined from a new position. Mayes's focus, however, is on the replanting, while Hemingway's is on the uprooting, reflecting their different stances in terms of the nurturing provided by the ground of the community.

This cyclical example of being uprooted then buried in order to grow anew is representative of the sabbatical expatriate narrative because it outlines the dual nature of living abroad for a portion of the year, the split focus inherent in having a dual life with two communities that each carry different expectations and responsibilities. Mayes is a professor in California in the winter months, and a do-it-yourselfer fixing up a house in Italy in summer. This split life echoes Hemingway's belief (as well as the beliefs of Wharton and Asya) that to be geographically distant allows for better perspective on the constraints of old lives. She can't help but swing back and forth between the impressions that both worlds make on her, whether that is through the examination of the structures she calls home or how much closer she comes to nature compared to her isolated city life. Being in a new

environment gives her the space to examine the impact, the positives and negatives of the old.

2) The Dual Life Examined

Mayes uses time and the cycle of life—emphasizing the seasons, the academic year, the ancient, distant, and recent past, holidays or the growth of flowers and vegetables, the ripening of fruits and nuts, as well as the restoration of an abandoned home—to emphasize the duality in her life.

Cycles. Though the weed machines and discer make shorter work, I still feel that I fall into this ancient ritual of summer. Italy is thousands of years deep and on the top layer I am standing on a small plot of land, delighted today with the wild orange lilies spotting the hillside (UTS 13).

In one sweep she goes through all of time again and again, the depth of the land a result of so many summers of orange lilies, which are at once ephemeral as indicated by ‘today’, as well as eternal in their ‘ancient ritual’ of life and death.

Mayes continues to shift from the grand sweep of all of time into the small everyday details that matter despite it. “We can walk here, the latest little dots on the time line. Knowing that, it always amazes me that I am intensely interested in how the map is folded, where the gas gauge is pointed, whether we have withdrawn enough cash, how everything matters intensely even as it is disappearing” (UTS 175). She uses those disappearing and insignificant details to place herself within the grand sweep of time in sentences that mark the quickly disappearing joys and pleasures of a single day—blooming lilies—and stretches those joys and pleasures all the way back through time—ancient rituals of life and death. Because, for Mayes, though those daily moments are small and insignificant to history, it is the details of living daily that connect us to the community that ultimately forms the basis

for the legends. Steinbach experiences this need to acknowledge the past she is stepping into, as an avenue to renewal, stating, “As I allowed myself to be drawn into the net of beauty and history that hangs like a bridal veil over Paris, my excitement grew” (28). For Steinbach, as for Mayes, history is part of the ritual dressings of new beginnings, something to look through when facing the future, and then pulled back so that a new phase might be revealed.

Time stretches on forever, and though there’s no choice but to live in the now⁶⁰, recognizing her place on that endless cycle of sunrises and summers is how she pays homage to the metaphorical restoration she undertakes, pulling back the layers, evaluating what is found beneath and shoring up in order to create anew on top. This same sentiment was echoed in the way Mayes described the feeling of being returned to herself after her divorce, as well as the “new identity” she described herself creating in Italy (UTS 25). She is restored as well as made new; the old is celebrated in light of how it fostered the creation of the new.

Keeping the old as building blocks for the new, Mayes addresses the fact that she and Ed have chosen a dual life—despite the occasional urge to “just stay here, go native,” (UTS 133)—have chosen not to give up their life in America completely. She came to the realization that she would not want to give up her California life when hearing another expatriate’s feelings on Rome; “Every time I went back to America, I just couldn’t wait to get back. It wasn’t a rejection—or maybe it was. Anyway, I’ve never wanted to be anywhere else” (UTS 87). Mayes’s first reaction is to agree whole-heartedly, only to realize, “that’s not really the truth” (UTS 87). Mayes reevaluates how she actually feels, agreeing that “I

⁶⁰ “All true, but what can you do but live now?” (UTS 88).

succumb totally to the ‘magic’ of this place, but I know the appeal to me is partly the balance it restores to my life in America. I’m not about to leave there, even if I could” (UTS 87). She is not rejecting her current life or country outright, but she is still seeking another as a way to gain the balance she feels her own country lacks. As an adult, a professor, a mother, she cannot wholly give up the responsibilities she carries that are connected to San Francisco and that allow her the ability to be in Cortona, though the temporary priority shift she feels while in Cortona allows her to shoulder those duties without becoming engulfed by them. She attempts to explain this balancing act to her dinner partner.

‘My job at home is hard but I really love it—I’m pushed by it. And San Francisco is not home at the blood root, but it’s a lucky, very beautiful place to live, earthquakes and all. Spending time here lets me escape the craziness and violence and downright surreal aspects of America, and my own overscheduled life. Three weeks after arrival, I realize I’ve let down some guard that is so instinctive to me, living in an American city, that I don’t realize I have it...Literally, my pulse slows,’ I continue. ‘Even so, I sense that I can best develop my thinking there—it’s my culture, my rough edge, my past’ (UTS 87-88).

Living in America causes Mayes to erect guards, walls and ways of keeping the violence and surreal out of her every day mindset. That guard isolates her so that she might continue to function under the stress of her ‘overscheduled’, ‘surreal’ life. America—her culture, past, and rough edge—acts as a whetstone upon which she might sharpen herself, as though she must be a weapon and on guard against attack, or to fight for advancement. “Maybe living with Bay Bridge traffic and San Francisco prices prepares us for anything” (UTS 88). Though she notes the traffic and prices, it is the stress and exclusivity that are exemplified by traffic jams and expensive living that she must be prepared for while living in America. Italy on the other hand, allows her ‘pulse to slow’ and the barrier to come down so that she might reconnect to the natural world and the community around her, outside the car and with time to discuss the ripening vegetables at the market.

This moment of reflection on her reasons for staying in Italy only part time, the recognition of the affects Italy has had on her life as a whole, stood out for me because it was in direct contrast to my own narrative. Mayes finds balance by spending time away from home. I left home because I had lost my balance, lost all direction, and when I moved, it felt as if I gained a life and a direction. For example, going home for Christmas, I was made aware of how small my life was before I moved: “Texting Felicia on our American cell phones helped remind me I did have a life outside those four walls, my life had not shrunk back to the edge of my parents’ property lines, but leaving them at security, even with tears in my eyes, made me feel taller, as though I really was an adult because I had to leave my parents, I had a life to return to.”⁶¹ Expatriation brought balance to Mayes’s life in America, whereas I experienced the realization that the only thing I had left in America was my family and my intentions on returning to the States were still unclear. If I did go back, I wanted my life to be different; I did not want to mediate or mitigate my life with time away, I wanted to alter it completely.

Though Mayes has no intention of leaving her life in California behind, she is also aware that it has an effect on her that needs to be mitigated. Compared to Sadler’s complaint of his hometown in England, “Nothing ever happened” (Sadler 8), which drove him to search out excitement elsewhere, Mayes relationship to California is more complicated and her new life in Italy gives her the chance to examine the ways in which her guard has come down and her attitude shifted since leaving California. Mayes dives into the duality and the cycles that surround her, comparing her two lives and homes, as a way to

⁶¹ See pages 97-98 of this text.

understand how her past has brought her to her present, and how reconnecting to the old (to the ancient, the seasonal, the ephemeral) can bring new life.

3) Home vs. Home

Specifically comparing the structures Mayes calls 'home' in either country, allows Mayes to employ what she had read in Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*: "He wrote about the house as a 'tool for analysis' of the human soul. By remembering rooms in houses we've lived in, we learn to abide (nice word) within ourselves" (UTS 95). Examining her physical home in California allows her to examine the type of life she leads in America compared to the structure she is restoring and molding to the life she hopes to live in Italy.

In San Francisco, I go out on the flower-filled tiny back deck of my flat and look three stories down at the ground—a city-sized terrace surrounded with attractive low-maintenance flower beds...cared for by a gardener. It does not lure me. That jasmine on the high fences has climbed to my third floor and blooms profusely around the stair railing, I am thankful for. At night after work, I can step out to water my pots and watch for stars and find the tumbling vines sending out their dense perfume. Such flowers—jasmine, honeysuckle, gardenia—spell South, metabolic home, to my psyche. A fragmental connection though—my feet are three stories off the earth. When I leave my house, concrete separates my feet from the ground...I look into or onto the tops of trees, wonderful trees. My house backs onto the very private gardens unhinted at by the joined fronts of Victorian houses in my neighborhood. The center of the block is green. If all of us took down our fences, we could wander in a blooming green sward. Because I like my flat so much, I didn't know what I missed (UTS 97).

Mayes is aware of her isolation from nature caused by living three floors up, being surrounded by a sea of concrete, by fences that separate private gardens, which are themselves hidden from view. Only the persistent climbing vines reach her and remind her of how isolated she really is from the wild elements and actual dirt. The small details of life

in Italy, such as seeing stars again⁶² and experiencing thunderstorms, reconnect her to her childhood memories of the outdoors. “I’m thrilled because of my childhood in the South, where they really know how to put on the sound and light. San Francisco rarely has thunderstorms and I miss them” (UTS 70). It took leaving her flat and plunging herself into the isolated acreage of her Italian getaway to remind her of what she’d missed and bring her back to those simple pleasures of childhood once more. Her ‘fragmental connection’ indicates her sense of imbalance, that there are fragments missing or pieces out of place in San Francisco, pieces she is reminded of by the smell of the flowers and the sight of the leaves and private parks she cannot touch. If she could only touch them—take down the fences and have a chance to wander—she might find a full connection, not separated by concrete.

Mayes sees a shift in herself when it comes to the work that goes into restoring a house, finding it to be fun, fulfilling, and even relaxing compared to her approach to housework in California. “Why does the prospect seem fun, when I found remodeling my kitchen in San Francisco a deep shock to my equilibrium? At home, we can’t even hang a picture without knocking out a fistful of plaster” (UTS 26). In America, a ‘remodel’ appears to indicate a complete removal and replacement of some aspect of the home and perhaps the life; of breaking while attempting to improve. While in Italy the emphasis is on restoration. “Restoration. I like the word. The house, the land, perhaps ourselves” (UTS 95). Instead of removal and replacement that would cause damage and shock, they undertake a task of rediscovery and creation, of bringing back life to a home that has laid empty for

⁶² Mayes mentions the stars in two separate, though very similar passages: “I forget the stars, living in the ambient light of a city. Here they are, all along, spangling and dense, falling and pulsating” (UTS 33); “I forget the stars and here they are, so alive all along, pulsing and falling” (UTS 86).

thirty years, rather than attempting to rebuild completely. It is the work done with her own hands in Italy that leaves her with a sense of connection and self-knowledge.

Usually, if I am polishing silver, ironing, vacuuming at home, I am highly conscious that I am 'wasting time,' I should be doing something more important—memos, class preparation, papers, writing. My job at the university is all-consuming. Housework becomes a nuisance...Why am I humming as I wash windows—one of the top ten dreaded chores? Now I am planning a vast garden. My list includes sewing! At least a fine handkerchief linen curtain to go over the glass bathroom door. This house, every brick and lock, will be as known to me as my own or the loved one's body (UTS 95).

In California, her sense of duty to the job and students she is beholden to leaves her no time to care for the space she lives in without feeling as though she is neglecting more important responsibilities. She puts herself second to meet the needs of others as well as to ensure the continuation of her job outside the home which bestows more social prestige and secures her sense of importance within the community. Housework is a waste of time predominately because it does not advance her career and no one else will see whether her silver is polished or her floor vacuumed. In Italy Mayes's job is the restoration, the creation and caring for a home. She is out of reach of the daily social and communal expectations that drive her life in San Francisco and instead in a place where those she encounters expect her to care for her home by virtue of the fact that is what brought her there. Cleaning is no longer menial but an aid in the creation of beauty and taking care of her home becomes a way to know and care for herself—to return to a clean and ordered state of being—as well as a way to fulfil community expectations. Without responsibilities that involve pleasing scores of others, Mayes is free to allow her own welfare to take precedence.

One aspect of life Mayes reengages in is her love for food and cooking, which links her back to summers cooking with her mother and their family's cook in Georgia. Considering the kitchen she wanted to have in Italy she admits, "We poured so much energy

into the kitchen because a dominant gene in my family is the cooking gene” (UTS 124). Describing her kitchen in San Francisco, Mayes notes the tile floors, the mirrors, the “restaurant stove big enough to take off from the San Francisco airport”, as well as sky lights and classical music (UTS 36). However, she never describes cooking on that giant stove or having any mouths to feed, instead mentioning restaurants and take out and failed moments of jam making.⁶³ The Italian kitchen slowly evolves from rough planks of wood on sawhorses acting as a countertop in what was the old kitchen to the new kitchen—what had been a manger (already a symbol of birth and new beginnings) transformed with basic materials of “waxed brick”, “white plaster”, “dark beams” (UTS 123). The décor is plain, open, and useful. Accented here and there by new appliances and lit by “the one absolutely American feature” of two bright lighting fixtures (UTS 124), the kitchen remains simple with the focus once again on the food and company—and company she has—as opposed to chrome and fancy stovetops that are never put to use.

The main feature Mayes credits for allowing this reconnection is “that prime ingredient, time” (UTS 125). Time allows her to experiment once again with making preserves, hoping that “here, I think, I’ll master the art my mother should have passed to me,” the “gene my mother had for laying-by rows of” jars filled with fruit jelly (UTS 82). She was unable to perfect the preserves in California, felt as though she had lost a part of her mother’s skill that she should, and wanted, to call her own, and it is because of the time she has in Italy—even when she should be “painting shutters instead of stirring fruit” (UTS 83)—that she feels at ease enough to lay aside her chores and responsibilities and practice a lost craft.

⁶³ See p.125 for discussion of restaurants and easy eating options and pp.82-83 for a discussion of attempting to make jam.

Cooking, for Mayes, is the “familial connection” and “destiny” that Italy and her new house has allowed her to rediscover (UTS 25). Despite the fact that “in our normal life in San Francisco, everyday cooking becomes, at times, a chore,” (UTS 125) she described herself as “one who has used Williams-Sonoma as a toy store for years” (UTS 36), which indicates that she enjoyed the idea of cooking. In Italy though, her simple kitchen, devoid of the showy stove and gadgets, inspires her to “begin to get back to an elementary sense of the kitchen” (UTS 36), getting back to the ingredients. “Three ingredients is about all we manage most nights, but that seems to be enough for something splendid. The idea of cooking here inspires me—with such superb ingredients, everything seems easy” (UTS 36). Her entire attitude to cooking begins to revolve around the cyclical nature of the seasons; “At home I plan a menu ahead, though I frequently improvise as I shop. Here, I only begin to think when I see what’s ripe this week” (UTS 120). She begins to understand why the refrigerators are so small, as locals gather fresh ingredients and only buy what is necessary and ripe, rather than stockpiling food (UTS 120). She learns to use what is available, to understand the Tuscan way of cooking, and ends up including enough recipes in her memoir to fill two chapters.

It is also through food that Mayes (as well as Mayle and Sadler⁶⁴) connects to the locals. One day when the pine trees lining their driveway begin to drop their cones, she is educated by Signor Martini, the realtor, on the proper way to extract pine nuts. She makes an Italian dessert, *torta della nonna*, approved upon tasting by Signor Martini who opens up and divulges some of his own closely guarded family history. Upon his departure he says,

⁶⁴ Mayle connects to his neighbors as they continue the arrangement to care for the vineyards and plant new melon fields (pp.7-8 and pp.48-49). Sadler is inducted into a dinner group he calls The Famous Five (p.38) when he eats the proffered pig’s ear and professes his delight (p.70).

“*Ciao.*’ Regardless what I’ve learned in language classes, among adults in rural Tuscany *ciao* is not tossed about. *Arrivederla* or, more familiarly, *arrivederci* are the usual good-byes. A little shift has occurred” (UTS 75). Baking, cooking, or shared consumption lead to the many little shifts that allow the opening of further communication between Mayes and the residents of Cortona. Through their patronage of the local shops Mayes and Ed start to become locals, known for their food orders and encouraged to buy on credit as the shopkeepers know and expect their continued return⁶⁵. “By now they know what kind of bread we want, that we want the *bufala*, buffalo milk mozzarella, not the *normale*, regular cow’s milk kind” (UTS 91). They are learning the local tastes and preferences and learning from the local shopkeepers about seasonal cooking.

Preparing meals becomes a pleasure as it often involves multiple people, in the way her mother used to cook. “She had people around her, as we do here” (UTS 125). Meals are to be shared, resulting in a brand new, very long table just outside the open kitchen doors on the wide patio, “because inevitably guests gather—friends from home, a relative’s friends from somewhere who thought they’d say hello since they were in the area, and new friends, sometimes with friends of *theirs*” (UTS 127). Rather than owning a stove big enough to feed a restaurant and yet never having the time to use it, now Mayes has a table big enough to accommodate the entire village.

Not only does the pair “eat outside almost every meal,” their land often contributes to their dinner, leaving Mayes feeling “restored to the basic pleasure of connection to the outdoors” (UTS 98). The pine and almond trees divulge sweet nuts and cultivating planted and voluntary fruit trees gives her the chance to promote the growth of what becomes her

⁶⁵ “Maria Rita starts to go in back of her shop and bring out the just-picked lettuces, the choice fruit. ‘Oh, pay me tomorrow,’ she says if we only have large bills” (UTS 91).

simple ingredients. She plants lettuce in a flowerbed and “now they’re everywhere; it feels odd to be weeding the flower bed and accumulating dinner at the same time” (UTS 131-32). During a Christmas visit to Cortona, Mayes and Ed harvest the olives growing on their terraces, manage to find a local mill not yet closed for the season, and as an end result carry home eighteen kilograms of oil, “Our oil!” (UTS 211) Along with other food related festivals, an olive oil tasting takes place in Cortona, bringing the town together, centred on the joy of tasting and sharing the results of a season’s hard labor. She physically interacts with the seasons, literally and figuratively reaping what she sows, as she works to restore house and land in Italy.

Mayes takes pride in the results of her yard work, and the considerable effort she put in. “This is work versus workout...whatever, I’m worn out by this labor and I also like it tremendously” (UTS 256-57). There is a sense of accomplishment clearing the land compared to spending an hour in an aerobics class. The same way that she questioned her new enthusiasm for housework, Mayes evaluates her new gardening skills, as so much of her time in Italy is spent outdoors, compared to those employed in San Francisco where her “houseplants know it’s feast or famine” (UTS 95). Mayes ruminates on the ivy she hacks away from one of the terrace walls, and how

Ivy kills. We have miles of the stuff. It causes stone walls to fall. Some of the trunks are as big as my ankle. I think of the ivy I have in pretty jardinières on my mantle in San Francisco, imagine that in my absence they will bolt, strangle the furniture, cover the windows (UTS 55).

With her attention devoted to the ivy in Italy—to the reclamation of something buried and overtaken by something else—the ivy in San Francisco has a chance to develop—left in neglect, things will build up in her absence and need to be addressed upon return. The ivy doesn’t stop growing just because one is not there to see it grow. However, she does not

dwell on this thought for long because she falls into a hole and ends up discovering an ancient Medici water cistern. It is telling of the gains she experiences in Italy, the structures and secrets revealed beneath the ivy and within hidden holes, are far too distracting to dwell for long on the losses she might experience by neglecting her normal life for a few months out of the year. Restoring a home, removing tendrils of ivy, and pruning trees can reveal lost structures and encourage new growth. The interpretation for the sabbatical expatriate narrative being that in order to “enlarge the psychic place one lives in,” an upheaval or severance must take place. Mayes uses the houses she lives in, the work she does in them, and the way she acts while living within their walls to demonstrate the growth possible through upheaval and severance.

Chapter 4: The Bohemian Expatriate Narrative

1) A Summary

The bohemian expatriate narrative struggles with the idea of what is “real life”, as Elisabeth Eaves calls it in Wanderlust (2011): is it the life one left behind and must therefore eventually return to, or is it the life one creates abroad? Adam, in Leaving the Atocha Station (2011), says of being in Spain, “Nobody knows me. So I thought: you can be whatever you want to people...At first I felt very free, as if my life at home wasn’t real anymore” (62). Being somewhere else leaves Adam feeling disconnected from his home, not sure whether one life is more real than the other. In Tropic of Cancer (1934), Henry Miller vacillates between the two: “America. It’s a name you give to an abstract idea...” (167). Then, “Paris is a whore. From a distance she seems ravishing...and five minutes later you feel empty, disgusted with yourself. You feel tricked” (168). Neither one seems to live up to the ideas one has about it. Some leave to escape the expectations of home—the “marriage story” as Nancy K. Miller calls it in Breathless (44)—only to “end up even more hopelessly entangled with my parents...In the end, I had to leave Paris, if I wanted to be free” (NKM vi). The old life begins to gain more psychic weight while the new life can appear to be a burden or a failed experiment. Others left to escape similar expectations only to wonder if they were missing out on “something I was supposed to be doing somewhere else” (Eaves 212). The bohemian expatriate narrative is an exploration, through expatriation, of the disconnect and the distance between the actual—reality, true investment and connection to the real world—and the virtual—the potential, the multiple possibilities inherent in expectations and dreams.

Compared to the sabbatical expatriate narrative, where the intent is to integrate oneself into the community by delving into the culture, the bohemian expatriate narrative is

one where the intent is to try out a possible alternative—beyond the expectations and limitations of home—while being doubtful of the search for something better. These narratives are generally centred on someone who struggles with his or her identity at home and hopes expatriation will be a means of finding themselves while questioning the entire process of finding oneself through living abroad. The doubt surrounding the processes of expatriation is ultimately what keeps the bohemian character from crossing the line from tourist—visiting a foreign land for pleasure—to an expatriate—someone who lives, invested, in another country. Adam, in Leaving the Atocha Station, struggles with the actual and the virtual, struggles to make his life abroad feel real and to connect to a place he isn't sure he wants to call home.

Ben Lerner lays out what is meant by the actual and the virtual in terms of poetry in his monograph The Hatred of Poetry (2016). He states that Plato, in “The *Republic's* attack on poets has helped sponsor for thousands of years the vague notion that poetry has profound political stakes” (28), while the ‘actual’ poems on the written page fall far short of “the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical—the human world of violence and difference—and to reach the transcendent or divine” (12-13). The virtual Poem represents the hope for more—a desire to connect to the divine—while the actual poem fails that desire and remains within the realm of the actual, the human, in error. The monograph argues that just because actual poems do not live up to the virtual potential ascribed to them at the beginning of Western civilization, does not mean that we should not continue to try to “reach the transcendent or divine,”—“indeed, the word we often use for such desire is ‘Poetry’” (84)—and that even bad poems are indicative of an ideal; “The more abysmal the experience of the actual, the greater the implied heights of the virtual” (43). The fact something can be agreed upon to be terrible must indicate that there is an ideal

against which the potential of the actual is being judged. Our expectations are that against which we judge things, be it poetry or travel destinations, but like Kristen Newman, in What I Was Doing While You Were Breeding (2014), we can't let the "fear of disappointment" stop us, "never going to Paris in case it was a let down."⁶⁶

Leaving the Atocha Station is a prime example of a bohemian expatriate narrative because Ben Lerner uses the entire novel as a meditation on the actual versus the virtual. Whereas the sabbatical narratives are generally memoirs, focused on truthfully reporting the events of a person's life, the bohemian narratives are a mixture of autobiography and fiction. Autofiction, of which Atocha is an example, troubles the idea of autobiographical truth, the sense of trust between the author and the reader as laid out in Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, that an autobiography is a "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."⁶⁷ As Lerner's protagonist shares extra-textual similarities to Lerner the story has the feeling of an autobiography, though the title page clearly states it is "A Novel." This complicates the distance between the virtual persona of the protagonist and the actual person of the author. Autofictions "work to defy Philippe Lejeune's proposition...specifically problematize the truth-telling, testimonial function associated with autobiography. They privilege semiosis...over mimesis..."⁶⁸ Semiosis deals with the process of signification in language or literature, the way words can have multiple

⁶⁶ Kristen Newman, What I Was Doing While You Were Breeding: A Memoir (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2014) p.80.

⁶⁷ Paul John Eakin, How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999) p.2.

⁶⁸ Alex Hughs, "Recycling and Repetition in Recent French 'Autoficition': Marc Weitzmann's *Dobrovskian Borrowings*" in *The Modern Language Review* Vol 97, No 3, July, 2002) pp.566-576. P.567

meanings, compared with mimesis or imitation and representation. Which means that (similar to Lerner's character Adam) the reader cannot be quite sure of the truth and whether Adam is lying, or Lerner is lying. Which truth is actually real, which truth is potentially real? Is Lerner, or Adam, playing with slippery signification or actually attempting to represent the world?

Furthermore, it should be noted that The Hatred of Poetry is ultimately a defence of poetry as a genre and as Lerner says, "a large part of the appeal of the defence as a genre is that it is itself a kind of virtual poetry—it allows you to describe the virtues of poetry without having to write poems that have succumbed to the bitterness of the actual" (32). Lerner is a poet and yet he chose to write Atocha as a novel, another way to meditate on his subject matter without writing an actual poem. Also, Atocha gets its name from a poem by John Ashbery of the same name, from a collection called The Tennis Court Oath (1962). Diederik Oostdijk, in his essay "Fulbright Poems: Locating Europe and America in the Cold War", discusses how "Ashbery is unmistakably more sceptical of the attempt to find himself, Europe, and America...implicitly questions whether travellers can ever really see Europe or America neutrally or objectively...or do the sights automatically become a symbol of their own struggles or their Americanness?"⁶⁹ Oostdijk argues that Ashbery plays "a post-modern game with us as his signifiers do not lead to very clear signified," which would further the idea that though one is seeing (or reading) one thing, it does not mean that there are not a multitude of other meanings to be attributed (180). The fact that Lerner references this in his title is telling of Lerner's interest in playing with signifiers and meanings. Oostdijk goes

⁶⁹ Diederik Oostdijk, "Fulbright Poems: Locating Europe and America in the Cold War, in American Writers in Europe: 1850 to the Present, ed. Ferda Asya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.180.

on to discuss Ashbery's writing techniques in Tennis Court Oath and how he uses "collage and so-called cutup techniques," (180) which involves piecing together scrambled bits from other sources—a technique Lerner's character Adam uses in Atocha—connecting him to people like William Burroughs and the Beats who began experimenting with cutups in the 1950s. "Cut-ups had the power to decondition by cutting through the normal syntax, fracturing the expected patterns and revealing a new set of relationships and meanings" (Miles 236). Lerner has Adam practice this technique in his own poetry but also shows Adam constantly pondering the multitude of possibilities inherent in speech as well, particularly when listening to and translating Spanish. "This ability to dwell among possible referents, to let them interfere and separate like waves, to abandon the law of the excluded middle while listening to Spanish—this was a breakthrough in my project" (LAS 14). He becomes enamoured with the idea of being in that previously 'excluded middle,' that place between direct translations where it seems anything might mean anything.

Adam germinates Lerner's own ideas around poetry, pondering (in 2011 what Lerner says in Hatred in 2016) the possibility of "any poems as machines that could make things happen, changing the government or the economy or even their language, the body or its sensorium, but I could not imagine this" (LAS 44). Adam cannot see how the art he creates could possibly have actual, real world, effects. But he must believe in the possibility—the virtual power of Poetry—that it could.

When I imagined the total victory of those other things over poetry, when I imagined, with a sinking feeling, a world without even the terrible excuses for poems that kept faith with the virtual possibilities of the medium, without the sort of absurd ritual I'd participated in that evening, then I intuited an inestimable loss, a loss not of artworks but of art, and therefore infinite, the total triumph of the actual, and I realized that, in such a world, I would swallow a bottle of white pills (LAS 44-45).

Neither Lerner nor Adam wants a world without the virtual possibility of Poetry as both traffic in it: the writing in Atocha itself is poetic with long rambling sentences sprinkled with commas as though they were meant to be line breaks. Lerner uses Adam to push the idea of searching for the virtual to the breaking point. Atocha is a prime example of a bohemian expatriate narrative because Adam goes to extremes to create a new self, a virtual self, only to have his world crash down around him when the actual bursts through (in the shape of a bombing at the train station) reminding him that he has created nothing actual in his time abroad: creating a virtual self left him with no real connections or relationships and feeling more disconnected from the actual than ever.

2) Creating the Virtual

Lerner's ideas about the actual and virtual in poetry are iterated through Adam's discussion of the genre and can be seen as a metaphor for his expatriation.

By refusing to absorb me the poem held out the possibility of a higher form of absorption of which I was unworthy, a profound experience unavailable from within the damaged life, and so the poem became a figure for its outside (LAS 20).

Adam reads his exclusion from the world of the poem as an indication that there is something from which to be excluded, in this case the virtual world of Poetry, but if read as a metaphor for his expatriation Adam sees his exclusion from his home world—his inability to feel absorbed by life at home, to feel a profound experience of connection—as an indication that there was somewhere—an undamaged outside—where he might be truly absorbed.

Adam constantly attempts to manipulate situations—his facial features, speech and body language—in order to project an ideal, 'undamaged', image of himself to his new community in the hopes of being brought inside. Aside from the fact that Adam believes he

“didn’t need to establish a life in Madrid beyond the simplest routines; I didn’t have to worry about building a community, whatever that meant” (LAS 15) because he wouldn’t be in Spain that long and “thought of myself as superior to all the carousal” of the Spanish nightlife, he nonetheless depends on the perceptions of others to help him create his mysterious poet persona (LAS 21). At a friendly bonfire, though Adam has a limited understanding of the language, his focus is entirely on appearing to understand so as not to appear as the stupid American. “I almost never spoke, although I tried to smile and to imply with my smile that I understood what was being said around me, letting it fluctuate as though in reaction to their speech” (LAS 12). Forgetting his face for a moment, Adam is caught smiling through an apparently distressing story told by a woman named Isabel. The Spanish speakers all stare at him, “with anger, disbelief” (LAS 12). Adam ends up getting punched in the face. Even the punch is an opportunity for Adam to attempt to appear otherwise.

It wasn’t a powerful blow, but I figured I should let it lay me out...I could taste the blood from my mildly cut lip and I bit hard to deepen the cut so that I would appear more injured and therefore solicit sufficient sympathy to offset the damage my smiling had done. As I covered my face in my hands and writhed as though in pain, I was careful to spread the blood around, and when I picked myself up and reentered the firelight Isabel gasped and said my mother, my God (LAS 13).

He uses the physicality (including his own blood) of the scene, since his language skills are lacking, to elicit sympathy and reposition himself within the issue. The goal, explained with a detailed description of a perfectly crafted look held on his face during uncomfortable social situations, “was to make my insufficiencies appear chosen, to give my unstylish hair and clothes the force of protest; I was a figure for the outside to this life, I had known it and rejected it and now was back as an ambassador from a reality more immediate and just” (LAS 4). He wants to appear to be the outsider who has already rejected everything on offer

to him by society, such as that at the party he attends, so that he is therefore shielded from the rejection he would inevitably face if he were to enter the party genuinely seeking intimacy and connection. If one has already rejected the judgments and expectations of others one cannot be hurt by them.

Adam also relies on language to help create his persona, sometimes using misinterpretation and other times flat out lying—about being from New York and not Kansas or about his mother being dead—to create a certain impression.

I never spoke English with Teresa, not since the first night of our meeting when my volubility had swelled. I told her that this was to promote my acquisition of Spanish, but it was, in fact, to preserve the possibility of misspeaking or being misunderstood, and to secure and amplify the mystery of that inaugural outburst. I believed my rant on the way to Rafa's party had impressed her, and I was determined not to ruin it with banalities. With my performance in the car her sole sample of my English, I hoped she would always translate my fragmented Spanish in her head, transforming my halting and semicoherent utterances into the most eloquent English she could imagine...Of course she would never arrive at a satisfactory English formulation of whatever my Spanish negatively figured, but this would further preserve the mystique of my powers in my mother tongue (LAS 83).

Again, we are confronted with the ideas presented in The Hatred of Poetry: the power of language so terribly used to figure the possibility of its being used to a degree beyond what one might imagine. By speaking only terrible Spanish, Adam hopes to reinforce the idea that he is simply unable to actually communicate the true depths of what might be said, leaving "space for the Poem that never appears" (Hatred 103). He does not want to speak English for fear that it will break the illusion that he might be beyond eloquent if he did. He projects this reasoning onto Teresa, as he only 'believed' his rant had affected her such, projects what he wants her to believe of him, doubling the sense of the virtual because all the misinterpretation, translation and possible awe are in his head.

Using his various social circles against each other also contributes to Adam's image as someone mysterious and important. He crafts an image of himself for those at home as well as for those he might meet in Spain:

Although I had internet access in my apartment, I claimed in my e-mails to be writing from an internet café and that my time was very limited. I tried my best not to respond to most of the e-mails I received as I thought this would create the impression I was offline, busy accumulating experience, while in fact I spent a good amount of time online...looking at videos of terrible things (LAS 18-19).

He wants to return home having people believe that he'd done something with his time abroad, that he hadn't done what he could have been doing at home, which is, ironically, playing around in the virtual world instead of being out in the actual one. Spinning his activity level into something to be jealous of keeps him from looking boring. For instance, he intends "to hurt her a little" when he tells Isabel about having a poetry reading, which she had not been invited to.

I had a policy of keeping Isabel away from Arturo and Teresa, not because I didn't think they'd like each other, but because I wanted them to believe I had an expansive social life. But I knew she would be stung to think I'd given a public performance without her, stung and impressed I was receiving such attention, and that all this would improve her image of my poetry, lend it mystery, while also making her jealous of my other friends (LAS 53).

He is selective in the information he gives out—not telling her he hadn't planned to read in the first place—so that he will come out of the story with a glossy shine rather than as the anxious boy afraid of seeing the woman who runs his foundation because he "was convinced that she could see through me, that my fraudulence was completely apparent to her" (LAS 35). He avoids social occasions thrown by the foundation precisely for this reason, because they are situations in which he would be forced to face the actual: the representative responsible for his being in Spain, the work he should be doing to complete the requirements of being in Spain, and how far off the mark he actually was.

3) Faced with the Actual

As Adam becomes more dependent on the people around him to feed his new sense of self, he begins to realize the real-world consequences of his falsity. He says of coming to Spain that,

I came here...and nobody knows me. So I thought: You can be whatever you want to people. You can say you are rich or poor. You can say you are from anywhere, that you do anything. At first I felt very free, as if my life at home wasn't real anymore (LAS 62).

This is indicative of the obvious freedom of not having to define oneself against the expectations of home anymore, rendering it separate from the new life, and secondly of the fact that one must become entangled again—lose some freedom of possibility—if one is going to have anything real in the new life. This is reminiscent of Giovanni's Room, and David seeking out his “foreign sky, with no-one to watch, no penalties attached” (GR 57) and realizing at the novel's end that wherever he went he would have to face some form of responsibility if he wanted a true relationship. David throws himself into his new love before he understands this fact and pulls out at the last moment when he realizes he does not want to take responsibility for someone else. Adam, on the other hand, keeps people away with a false persona, and only later realizes that the responsibility to others is what will make his connections genuine. If David represents the Beats as Norman Mailer saw them—as people reacting to a world with a nuclear threat hanging over their heads, looking for a life of “experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention”—then perhaps Adam represents a new reaction. Instead of continuing to live in the ‘enormous present’ ‘without past or future’ as he had been doing—lying about his life

and attempting to be a virtual version of himself—he decides that the responsibility might be worth the trouble, that in order to have a future he has to accept and admit his past.

The moments when the actual begins to break into Adam’s virtual life make him realize how little true connection he has made in Spain because he was too busy focusing on maintaining his nebulous ball of possibility. Preserving the mystery requires Adam to keep others at arm’s length, particularly the likes of Maria Jose from the foundation as she was in possession of actual knowledge of Adam based on her academic position; he was afraid “that my fraudulence was completely apparent to her,” because she would be able to tell based on “the state of my Spanish and given the fact that each time she recommended, as a way of making small talk, a poet or authority on the Spanish Civil War, I blinked and said something about the name sounding familiar, although I wasn’t sure I used the right word for ‘familiar’” (LAS 35). If Maria Jose were to call him out, if he chickened out and didn’t participate in the reading, it would “somehow constitute the breaking point of my relationship with the foundation, that the total vacuity of my project would finally be revealed and I would be sent home in shame” (LAS 35). Actual action is required to maintain his virtual appearance, to keep him in Spain, and he resents Maria Jose for forcing him to act. His anxiety comes from the fact that he fears he hasn’t accomplished enough; his Spanish has not improved enough, to create the right impression when it counts, when there are consequences.

Seeing other Americans while abroad also threatens his sense of security within his virtual identity.

On the highway to Toledo we passed several tour busses full of what looked like Americans, digital cameras already in hand, and as we drew past them I expressed infinite disdain, which I could do easily with my eyebrows, for every tourist whose gaze I met. My look accused them of supporting the war, of treating people and the relations between people like things, of being the lemmings of a murderous and

spectacular empire, accused them as if I were a writer in flight from a repressive regime, rather than one of its most fraudulent grantees (LAS 47-48).

Adam is in Spain on a poetry fellowship, giving him no recourse to truly defend himself if confronted with his hypocrisy, making him all the more afraid of being found out, such as when Teresa's Aunt said

"You must come from money," Rufina said, ignoring me again. Then she said something idiomatic involving hands and clouds, which I assumed was a colorful way of saying the same thing. "Do you have to work at all?" (LAS 58)

Adam is put in a position of trying to hedge around the fact that he does not have to work, while still trying to look like a starving artist.

There are multiple stereotypical traveling types which Adam describes with condescension, as though they are simply a product of their culture without knowing that they are a product of their culture, the actual incarnate with no awareness of the virtual ideal Adam was attempting to inhabit:

interchangeable frat boys calling each other by their last names, calling each other fags, and the peroxided, inevitably miniskirted sorority girls spending their junior year abroad, dividing their time between internet cafés and discotecas, complaining about the food or water pressure in the households of their host families, having chosen Spain over Mexico...because it was safer, cleaner, whiter, if farther from their parents' gated communities (LAS 48).

The youth are 'interchangeable', not unique or interesting but a blurred together and indistinguishable 'family' of 'brothers and sisters' that can be picked out by their clothes and word choices. The fact that they are labelled as part of the fraternity and sorority systems indicates Adam's contempt for paying for inclusion within exclusive groups; groups he was not included in at home. They are people without compassion for others—using the word 'fag'—and who choose Spain for xenophobic reasons such as clean water and 'safety' rather than choosing Mexico, like Adam's friend Cyrus, who chose danger and adventure, looked

for “something ‘real’ to happen” (LAS 77). Of course, Adam doesn’t tell the reader why he picked Spain. He doesn’t explain what went into his planning, his pro- and con- list for traveling to Spain rather than going with Cyrus to Mexico. He doesn’t disclose the state of his parents’ home, whether it is behind a gate or not. In fact, he very rarely mentions his hometown at all.

Having delineated his hatred of tourists and backpackers he gets closer to describing himself when he finally mentions expatriates. “I reserved my most intense antipathy for those Americans who attempted to blend in, who made Spanish friends and eschewed the company of their countrymen, who refused to speak English and who, when they spoke Spanish, exaggerated the peninsular lisp” (LAS 48). American tourists that stand out are bad enough—they are the actual with no regard for the expatriate’s attempt to create a new and separate life, not trying to be anything other than what they are, only there to snap pictures and go back to their actual lives. The ones who ‘attempted to blend in’ were more contemptuous because they were faking belonging by avoiding the people who would call them out and exaggerating their connection to the language. They were the worst offenders to Adam because,

At first I was unaware of the presence in Madrid of these subtler, quieter Americans, but as I became one, I began to perceive their numbers; I would be congratulating myself on lunching with Isabel at a tourist-free restaurant, congratulating myself on making contact with authentic Spain, which I only defined negatively as an American-free space, when I would catch the eyes of a man or woman at another table, early twenties to early thirties, surrounded by Spaniards, reticent compared to the rest of the company, smoking a little sullenly, and I knew, we would both know immediately, that we were of a piece (LAS 48-49).

These “temporary expatriates”—the only usage of the word ‘expatriate’ in the novel—are offensive to Adam because he is essentially, one of them, a visitor, temporary and forgettable. The fact that he notes ‘authentic Spain’ as only ever an ‘American-free space,’

means he knows he will never actually belong—his presence will negate the authenticity— but as he is only interested in the image, he is terribly disappointed when he is reminded that he is not special and that the search for a virtual self is not new. He, like the others, must be ‘subtler, quieter,’ because he knows what he is doing is false, and he fears ‘catching’ another’s eye, being caught being false. The resentment came when Adam was reminded that he was not integrated, had left a home yet not succeeded in creating one to rival it, and that in the end he was nothing but an American playing at living abroad. These people make Adam aware of what he is doing: aware that expatriation isn’t a new phenomenon and that people have been ‘fleeing America’ for myriad reasons before him, and that his reasons were hardly the stuff of Poetry with a capital P, capable of creating great political radicalization to say the least.

When Adam’s perceived impact on his community is shaken, he starts to realize how little true connection he was making with his friends. He confesses to Teresa that he lied about his mother being dead and is defensive when she is not surprised because she “had assumed...that you were just drunk and high and homesick and wanted some attention...you have a poetic license” (LAS 84). He gets defensive because he thought he had fooled her, and she had correctly surmised he wanted attention and might be inclined to invent a story. In his horror at being found out he digs in deeper and says his mother is deathly ill. Teresa’s scepticism about Adam’s authenticity throws a wrench in the image Adam has crafted of himself, making him appear to be far more of a pathetic and needy liar than an eloquent and deeply feeling poet. “I had not realized how much I was invested in the idea that Isabel and Teresa were invested in me, and now that it seemed neither had the inclination even to feign serious investment, I felt not only rejected, but as though many months of research had evaporated” (LAS 101). Adam needed his friends to be invested

because without their investment he felt he had accomplished nothing. His virtual self had not brought him actual connection but left him with people who didn't really believe what he had to say. It makes him evaluate his intentions.

My distress about Isabel and Teresa, coupled with my guilt about my parents, opened onto larger questions about my fraudulence; that I *was* a fraud had never been in question—who wasn't?...I had been a small-time performance artist pretending to be a poet, but now, with an alarming fervor, I wanted to write great poems (LAS 101).

He admits that he was putting on a performance—of his identity as a poet, as well as his feigned unaffectedness—and that what he really wants is what he has pretended to want: to be a poet who at least attempts in the actual what has been hinted at in the virtual, “for everybody everywhere to read my poems, shatter storefronts, etc.” (LAS 102). He wants to make an actual impact, not just pretend, as the only actual impact he has created through pretending is his own ‘distress’ and ‘guilt’.

My own narrative reflects aspects of Adam's bohemian expatriate story. The doubt concerning the efficacy of expatriating as a way to gain a new life and try on new identities was certainly there, especially when confronted with my brother's patronizing comments.

“Look at you, ordering your own drink, all by yourself!” I couldn't blame him for thinking of me as pathetically shy because I hadn't provided much evidence to the contrary. Sure, I could move to London, but he was right to assume that that wouldn't change me overnight.⁷⁰

I knew I could do the things they doubted of me, but I was also aware that moving is not magic in and of itself. I had a virtual life in mind—how I wanted to be when I was in London—and like Adam, I worked to be that person. “I curated myself around Freddie, in a way that felt familiar to me. I had an idea of who I wanted to be around Freddie, most likely

⁷⁰ See page 87 of this document.

based on how I thought he perceived me.”⁷¹ The actual burst into my life when I realized that my virtual life depended on Felicia being present and that I would have to take real responsibility if I didn’t want it all to fall apart without her.

A bomb exploding at the train station is the ultimate example of the actual bursting through Adam’s virtual world and discouraging the small belief that he might be capable of being the poet that inspired others. Having been nearby when it happened, Adam wanders through the carnage on his way back to his apartment where he goes online, “calls up the New York Times, and clicked on the giant headline. The article described the helicopters I could hear above me” (LAS 118). Though the action is happening right outside his windows, he observes it all online or on the television, as though trying to keep the event in the realm of the virtual. The bomb was an actual event, not a virtual idea, and it would have effects far beyond what Adam might hope to accomplish with his poetry. And when Teresa’s boyfriend, Carlos, is capable of starting a chant at a protest afterward, and Adam witnesses Carlos’s capability of moving people with words alone, all Adam can feel is hate, because Carlos is embodying the virtual identity Adam wishes for himself. And when mockingly asked by Carlos whether he was “going to write a poem about the bombings,” Adam is only further reminded of how ineffectual he and his actual art are (LAS 134). Teresa picks up on Adam’s feelings of exclusion and tries to make him feel better by offering to continue working on his poetry with him. When he patronizingly stated that he wasn’t “very interested in poetry at a time like this,” and reminds her of the upcoming election (LAS 135) she pushes back, asking ““And what are you planning to do tomorrow...How are you going to participate in this historic moment?”” (LAS 135). She reminds him, like Carlos, that his

⁷¹ See page 137 of this document.

position is firmly on the outside of this event and that he will have no impact—virtual or actual—on its outcome. His only reply is to say, “It’s not my country” (LAS 136). While he may be in Spain to witness its ‘historic moment’, he was not a part of it, and the bomb and the protests and the election only served to remind him that he was denied inclusion despite all his attempts to blend in and be a part of “authentic Spain” (LAS 48).

The novel ends with Adam, together with Teresa, publishing a book of his poems and giving a reading of his work. He commits to action, sends “the announcement to my entire inbox,” (LAS 179) inviting people through a virtual medium to witness the actual results of real production. “If I was nervous, it was only about the fact that I wasn’t nervous, which might mean something was wrong with me” (LAS 180). Before, his nerves stemmed from his feelings of fraudulence and being discovered for a fraud; now he has something solid to show for his effort his nerves are calmed, though he still doubts that his success equals his being undamaged.

In conclusion, though others question the realness or actuality of expatriation, Leaving the Atocha Station is a prime example of the bohemian expatriate narrative because every part—from the poetic rambling sentences, to the fact that its protagonist mirrors the actual self of the author, to the protagonist’s obsession with his virtual identity while facing his lack of actual impact—works together to show the doubt and difficulty associated with attempting to create a new self abroad when one does not actually invest authentically.

Chapter 5: The Trailing Spouse Expatriate Narrative

1) A Summary

This chapter defines the trailing spouse expatriate narrative as being concerned with the move of wives, and sometimes entire families, in order to follow a partner's career abroad for anywhere from a year to multiple years. It follows the shifts in self-definition faced by the spouse as she gives up certain aspects of her previous agency in order to follow the career aspirations of her partner. Compared to the sabbatical and bohemian narratives, these protagonists often face the need to restore their sense of identity before considering its expansion or its veracity.

Brigid Keenan's memoir, Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse (2005), is exemplary of this type of narrative as it follows Keenan—as she follows her ambassador husband—over twenty years and nine foreign postings. Keenan laments the essential facts of being a trailing spouse, stating:

My misery is to do with the fact that an ex-patriate wife is just an appendage. Indeed, we are officially known by the people who employ our husbands as 'trailing spouses'. We trail along behind, we have no identities of our own—we are only in Central Asia, India, Africa or wherever, because of our husbands. We may be engineers, pharmacists, journalists, business women, experts in antiques, geneticist, but when we meet each other we don't say 'What do you do?'—we ask what each other's *husband's* job is. We are only connected to the outside world through the umbilical cord of the Office—where newspapers and letters are delivered, and where the secretary keeps the engagement diary. Since usually we can't earn our own money, we have to ask our husbands every time we want to spend some (DB 12).

Keenan lists the obstacles she faces during her twenty years abroad, addressing the loss of identity—the reduction to 'appendage,' from editor of a fashion magazine in her case—as she gives up her 'connections to the outside world' to live through the connections of others. She is infantilized, only nourished through another's agency. She makes note of the complicity of others in the spouse's feelings of inadequacy—from the treatment of the

spouse by the corporation or firm, the complicity of other wives, to the difficulty of finding productive work. Her narrative shows the struggle of the trailing spouse to maintain her identity and regain the agency lost with the sacrifice of career and the reduction to appendage.

While the main focus is the loss and struggle to regain agency, there are differences between trailing spouse narratives. For instance, Keenan covers a career's worth of trailing, from the decision to marry and follow to her husband's possible retirement, while other narratives tend to focus on one particular posting. Janice Y.K. Lee's The Expatriates (2016) sees two trailing spouses, and one arguably bohemian single expatriate, living in Hong Kong throughout the narrative. Jennifer Steil's The Woman Who Fell from the Sky (2010) sees Jennifer become a trailing spouse only in the epilogue, as she gives up her foreign journalism career in Yemen to marry and have children with the British ambassador, becoming "subject to embassy regulations" (Steil 327). Sarah Macdonald's Holy Cow! An Indian Adventure (2002) is the story of unmarried Macdonald giving up her news-casting career to live with her foreign correspondent boyfriend living in New Delhi.⁷²

Steil and Macdonald both faced being abroad as single women in cultures with stricter moral codes than home, and both chose to lie about their marital status: "Sick of the disapproving looks and murmurs, I've started telling people I'm engaged or married" (Macdonald 58). Steil professes that "I am the kind of person who makes eye contact with strangers on the subway, flirts with the men I meet on planes, and gives my phone number to random bus drivers. I can't help it. But now I would have to help it. Being too social a

⁷² Jennifer Steil, The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011). Sarah Macdonald, Holy Cow! An Indian Adventure (London: Bantam Books, 2004).

butterfly was likely to get my wings singed” (Steil 14). These women used false marriages, until actually married, to shield them from the prying questions faced within their new environments. This is reminiscent of a passage in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night (1934), when the main three female characters are described sitting together in a restaurant. “Their point of resemblance to each other and their difference from so many American women, lay in the fact that they were all happy to exist in a man’s world—they preserved their individuality through men and not by opposition to them” (Fitzgerald 72). Being abroad because of a man might distinguish the trailing spouse from American women at home making careers, but the modern trailing spouse is not so content as the women of Tender is the Night, who are ‘happy to exist in a man’s world.’ Women like Steil and Macdonald want more than an existence through a man, though they are still forced to recognize the boundaries they face as they work to maintain their individual agency in countries where women are considered second-class citizens.

Married before their first posting, Keenan does not focus on her femaleness as a source of possible sexual objectification within foreign cultures so much as what it means to stand in the background as a wife.

In England a middle-aged woman like me is usually invisible. I’ve endured so many conversations in which the men in the group have never looked in my direction once—only at the younger women. In Syria I used to get admiring glances, which made me feel terrific—until I read a booklet written for American new arrivals which said something like ‘No matter how old or fat you are, in Syria, men will always notice you...’ (DB 237).

For Keenan the fear is being nothing at all, being an appendage that is there only to service the whole. The same ‘admiring glance’ that proves her existence to Keenan—before she is once again relegated back to having no meaning—compared to the fear of being ‘singed’

reported by Steil. For some their sexuality is a way to reinforce their identity, while others find their sexuality used as a weapon against them.

Once the marriage status is established the follow up question is whether or not the woman has children, another marker of the trailing spouse as Keenan explains:

It's a fact that the birth rate among ex-pats is much higher than that of 'normal' women living and working in their own countries; when you can't have a career and are living away from home, family life is the only way to go (DB 122).

Children give the wife another avenue to identity: being a mother. Hilary, in Lee's The Expatriates, is rebuked for not having children, being told, "Out here, you're not a real woman unless you have four kids" (Lee 81). Not having children can be isolating and another way for one's peers to judge. Those with children, such as Keenan and Lee's character Margaret, make a point of noting the social benefits of having children. Keenan states, "School-age children are the key to a social life in any overseas posting—you meet all your new friends through them" (DB 144). And Lee, "When she first moved to Hong Kong, being involved with the kids' school made [Margaret] busy and made it easy to meet other women" (Lee 245). Children provide an instant identity as mother, social contact through child care and school functions, and are one of the ways a spouse might find a sense of purpose while abroad.

Despite the differences in these narratives the trailing spouses faces a loss of agency when they make the decision to follow rather than lead. They all sacrifice things they find essential to their identities—namely their careers—and this loss must be addressed and remedied.

2) The Loss of Agency

Diplomatic Baggage is exemplary of the trailing spouse expatriate narrative because it highlights the identity shifts that result from the narrowing of the trailing spouse's agency. Keenan experiences these shifts in cycles, her feelings of doubt, "inadequacy and failure" (11) being strongest at the beginning of each posting, until she begins to find ways to be productive and regain her sense of agency.

It's like being reincarnated eight times in one life...You arrive in each new place all naked (as it were) and friendless and vulnerable, you gradually build up a little world around yourself and then, bingo, you are suddenly sent off to the other side of the world to start all over again (DB 10).

Each posting strips the spouse of the identity she has built, leaving her naked: no job, no friends, and nothing to call her own. Diplomatic Baggage starts off with "my first Monday, the day that every wife of a man working abroad most dreads; the day your husband goes to the office and you have to face your new life ALONE" (DB 3). The husband already has his life and schedule planned out, he has somewhere to go, something to focus on, and colleagues to interact with from the start; only his location changes. The wife is faced with an empty schedule to fill, and only the new household staff to get to know (if they can work through the language barrier). "Sometimes I feel like a large dog waiting all day for its owner to come home and take it for a walk" (DB 12). Keenan feels as though she isn't allowed to go out on her own but must be led by her husband as he is the one with somewhere to be.

When considering her husband's marriage proposal, Keenan had a long list in the con column. To go so far away would not only affect her career but, "what about my family—not to mention furniture, pictures, books, food?" (DB 68) She feared being cut off, from friends and family, but also from those little things that make her feel connected and at home. There would inevitably be sacrifices, but she didn't want to feel as if she was missing out by going away. She inevitably experiences feelings of missing out anyway and

ends up comparing herself to friends back home. At the birth of her second child she counts the bouquets of flowers and compares the three received to the hoards she was sent for her first child, as though by the second everyone had forgotten about her (DB 106). Feeling “a miserable failure” in Barbados she thinks, “friends in London seemed to be doing so well, and here I was, clutching at straws...” (DB 165). She heard a friend who’d been on the same career path had been offered a promotion and she had to be reminded, though her tears, “Wouldn’t you rather be sitting in the sun on Sandy Lane beach with your children than in an office in London, for heaven’s sake?” (DB 11) Keenan’s career trajectory changed with her choice to become a trailing spouse and her narrative shows her attempts to keep a hold on the agency she does have to shape her identity in spite of her changing location.

One of Lee’s characters in The Expatriates questions the life she might have wanted, thinking about her husband’s decisions and wondering, “was it a life she wanted? Did she want the husband, the child? Or was it something she had just been programmed to think?” (Lee 191) Something is lost—Keenan is clutching to make her life appear presentable in comparison to her friends and Lee’s character Hilary can’t remember if what she had was what she wanted to begin with. There is a sense of needing to please other people with the state of one’s life, to be capable of giving a thorough answer to the questions: What do you have to show for your life? And do you regret the choice to follow another?

An informational packet is provided at the beginning of the posting, with “schooling options, medical care, and associations that women could join to integrate” (Lee 29).⁷³ These are meant to provide the spouse with connection to their peers as well as options for filling their time. “I could join the Bible study group, the lunch-brunch, the cooking club, the

⁷³ See Diplomatic Baggage p 173 where Keenan describes the depressing nature of their informational packet on New Delhi.

hikers; I could learn Spanish or yoga or do aerobics. I'm not really an organized activity person though; I'll think about it" (DB 31). Despite being provided with opportunities to mingle and explore, there is resistance to joining, as though becoming 'an organized activity person' will make her a drone, a member of another group rather than being an individual again. One incident sees Keenan attend a vegetable carving class.

We're talking about carving a yam into a lobster or a carrot into a rose. Shirley Conran once wrote that life is too short to stuff a mushroom—I remember fuming to myself that she'd obviously never been a wife overseas, when it is sometimes long enough to think of carving a white radish into the Taj Mahal...I thought of my successful journalist friends like Sandy in England, and before going to the lesson, I stomped around the house kicking the furniture and yelling at AW: 'This is wonderful! VEGETABLE CARVING is what my parents saved up and gave me a private education for...This is the stimulating, intellectually challenging career they wanted for me...This is why I came to Africa...' and so on. But as a matter of fact it was impossible to resist being intrigued—the Thai girl who gave the classes was so skillful, it was just a crying shame she wasn't doing it in granite or marble (DB 211).

In this incident, Keenan voices her resentment concerning her position and the lack of intellectual stimulus she is receiving. Keenan admits that the "paranoia about my career—or rather about the lack of it—is never very far away" (DB 10). This is the largest demotion experienced in the trailing spouse narratives, the sacrifice of the wife's career for the sake of the husband's; Steil sacrifices her job running a Yemeni newspaper to marry her ambassador husband and Macdonald quits her job as a news reporter in Australia. In the beginning Keenan attempts to keep her career on hold, taking a sabbatical—and coming back into the fashion world to find she was out of the loop and "hadn't a clue" (DB 100)—and then taking maternity leave. She experiences one of her worst fears early on when she finally "in effect, retired,"⁷⁴ and admits her position, out loud as well as to herself.

The man next to me at a dinner party asked what I did. This was exactly what I had been wondering to myself, but instead of bursting into tears and sobbing, 'I don't know, please help me, I used to be a fashion editor, but now...what am I?', I said,

⁷⁴ DB 117.

with a false smile, 'Well, I suppose I'm a housewife.' Whereupon he hitched his chair just a little bit away from me, and talked to the woman on his other side for the rest of the night (DB 117-118).

Attempting to save face while in the midst of an identity crisis she tries to own her position, only to be slapped with complete indifference, as though she had nothing to offer and everything she might have been before becoming a housewife was erased. Her attempts to publish are rejected and her freelance journalism falls flat; "Several times in our lives abroad I have found myself in scoop situations—Ethiopian revolution, invasion of Grenada, mutiny in the Gambia—but I've never yet managed to get a single word about any of them in print" (DB 97). Despite continuous rejections, Keenan continues to pick up projects, "grasped at anything I could find to do—from making dressing-gowns to writing books to trying to save historic buildings to fund raising (which is what we all do when everything else fails)" (DB 13). She does everything she can to fill her time, to make herself feel productive, so she will not feel the loss of her traditional career so keenly.

Having established herself within a posting, "built up a little world around" herself, in which she feels she has a measure of control, she is then "bitterly disappointed when AW was ordered on to the next place and I had to stop whatever I was doing" (DB 13). The challenge for the trailing spouse to maintain their identity is compounded not only by their attempt to find purpose in a foreign culture, but also by the fact that their priorities are second to the husband's. The trailing spouse must be "prepared to sacrifice themselves on the altars of their husbands' ambitions" (DB 13). Aside from having a disinterested dinner companion, Keenan suffers a doctor "more interested in whether AW could speak Farsi than whether I might be going to have a baby" (DB 101). Said doctor has her husband in Iran on a project before she knows whether she is pregnant or not. She appears to be the sole parent responsible for the care of the children— "I can't remember AW being with me at any Open

Evening, at any school, in any country” (DB 154)—and finds herself flying back and forth to England when the kids are put in boarding school. When she does find a project, she must be prepared to put it on hold for the sake of her husband and children.

3) Agency Regained

Though F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night (1934) is far from a trailing spouse narrative, I want to make the case that there is the fear of interdependence between husbands and wives when living abroad. The case of Dick and Nicole Diver shows an exaggerated example of the intertwining of identities and resulting dependence and sense of frustrated agency. Their relationship begins with the blurring of boundaries between patient and doctor while Nicole recovers from depression (as a result of incest) in a hospital abroad, “and as Dick became less and less certain of his relation to her, her confidence increased” (181). Despite attempting to sever their connection, the two get married. Their interdependence grows and leaves them both miserable. “His work became confused with Nicole’s problems; in addition, her income had increased so fast of late that it seemed to belittle his work” (227). She is dependent on him for her sense of wellbeing and confidence, for renewing her connection to the outside world and he has become wrapped up in her wellbeing as his own success as well as reliant on her family’s money. Their marriage ends in divorce when Nicole finally finds agency through the arms of another man and Dick leaves for America and is never heard from again.

For both husband and wife, the loss of an individual self meant the failure of the marriage. Dick fears that, “always when he turned away from her into himself he left her holding Nothing in her hands and staring at it, calling it many names, but knowing it was only the hope that he would come back soon” (239). He fears Nicole’s dependence on him

because he feels as though he has given her nothing to show for it. Being responsible for both their identities means that breaking the relationship leaves one person with nothing. In the end, that's person is Dick.

Keenan chose to write her memoir as a way to answer the questions asked by a fellow spouse on her first foreign posting.

She is rather like I was years ago when I didn't know whether to choose AW and an unknown future, or keep my marvelous job on a newspaper. I chose the unknown future, but did I do the right thing? Would it have been better if I'd opted for the job?" (DB 45).

The fact that the book comes from a place of justification, as well as selling her lifestyle to a newcomer, colours Keenan's perspective. She wants to answer a resounding 'yes' and to regret nothing. "All I know is that I've been utterly miserable in every one of the six countries across four continents that we've been to in the last twenty years. But then again, I cling to the thought that—up until now—I've cried almost as much when the time came to leave as I did when I arrived" (DB 9). Though her path has been difficult and made her dependent on her husband in many ways, it has taken her around the world, and she wants to get the point across that in each of those foreign countries she has managed to maintain a sense of self despite her doubts. She does not want to be Nicole Diver, depending solely on her husband to create her world for her, though she does admit that too much independence can also be detrimental to the relationship.

Three months is the longest time that we can be apart without endangering our marriage...In our experience, after three months we each become so used to being independent that no matter how much we have longed for each other in the meantime, being together again is really difficult—we find ourselves resenting our loss of freedom and the demands and interference of the other person (DB 12).

There is a balance between total independence and being an appendage and though she does not intend to live without him, she will not be left standing with 'Nothing' at the end of it all.

This mentality is reflected in the way Keenan begins her postings in doubt about her identity and then consciously works to change her mindset through counting her blessings and finding something positive to focus on.

I agonized about my role and identity for months, until I slowly came around to the idea that perhaps I had the best of all worlds. I was at home with my baby, and yet I had help; I didn't have to drive through traffic to be anywhere at 9 a.m., but I had some work to do (DB 118).

She finds aspects of her identity that have not changed despite the move and counts the things that she has at her disposal to help her rebuild her sense of agency. Motherhood, time at her disposal, and something to focus her creative energy on are all things that keep Keenan feeling in control of her life. The obvious and first listed identity for Keenan to focus on is being a mother. Having the social life children provide gives Keenan an outlet, but ultimately, caring for the children still puts her second to the needs of others and she must continue to look beyond motherhood to find a purpose that serves her need for creative production.

Keenan follows the advice of "an old hand in India" who provided her with "two rules for ex-pat happiness: one was Always Have Something to Do on Mondays, and the other was Make Your House Feel Like Home Before Anything Else" (DB 211). She takes to the markets and auction houses as an opportunity to furnish her various dwellings but also to look at the other customers and various wares.⁷⁵ She purchases everything from boxes of

⁷⁵ See page 83 of [Diplomatic Baggage](#).

Dutch plates in India⁷⁶, to “an enormous dining table for ten, and a hideous sideboard/cupboard thing...We’ve still got it in storage in Brussels” (DB 125). Homemaking as buying power is a way for Keenan to exercise her will over the family finances. Eventually she becomes a trader, purchasing fabrics and selling them on to someone in England, “so I can shop, free of guilt” (DB 285). She manages to combine two pursuits, shopping and being in touch with the fashion industry back home, to double her sense of productivity while taking advantage of her posting.

Keenan’s list of personal and professional achievements grows while living abroad as she becomes obsessed with maintaining an individual sense of self. Living abroad was not her idea and she doesn’t want to regret giving up a part of her agency. She works on overdrive to protect the agency she has left. She self-funds her projects as a way to doubly imply her independence despite not having control over her physical location. Expatriation was a secondary concern for Keenan; she wasn’t worried about how to live in a new culture so much as not losing herself to the wishes of others, whether those wishes belonged to her husband or his employers.

Though I did not follow anyone when I moved to England, my own narrative is comparable to Keenan’s in that it presents the struggle of finding oneself intertwined with another, dependent on their agency, and fearful of the loss of independence.

I was becoming dependent on her [Felicia], the way I’d become dependent on my Neil in college. We had other friends, lived with Krissy and Anna, but Felicia and I shared a bed. She reminded me of my mother. But I had had to learn to do things without my mother and I would have to learn to do things without Felicia. I did not want her to leave, to fly home to the States, and leave me in London with nothing. The same way I had come to London to gain a life, I had to make sure that I didn’t come to rely on Felicia the way I had relied on Neil and my mother to create that life for me.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Diplomatic Baggage p 181.

⁷⁷ See page 137 in this document.

The trailing spouse works to maintain her agency and my narrative was about my search for agency. Though our circumstances are not the same, our aim throughout our adventures is the same, to be in possession of a sense of self and self-worth that was not solely dependent on others.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Keenan's trailing spouse expatriate narrative depicts the principles of *resistance*, *acceptance*, and *adaptation* as presented by Joseph Shaules in The Intercultural Mind: Connecting Culture, Cognition and the Global World (2015).⁷⁸ Shaules defines these "possible reactions to the experience of cultural difference" with assumptions based on the open-systems view of living beings, that our reactions to cultural difference are our subconscious ways of trying to maintain the balance between our "inner mental life" and the changing patterns around us (Shaules 81-83). Keenan experiences *resistance*—which "can be seen as the equivalent of a psychological threat response, in which we resist integrating new patterns into our way of being" (Shaules 83)—when she begins each new posting with doubt and frustration. She goes through a period of *acceptance*—which "involves recognition that the patterns of cultural difference simply represent another way of doing things" (Shaules 83)—through interactions with her staff that give her insight into their beliefs and values as well as when she accepts that being a trailing spouse is simply an alternative way to engage in marriage and family. Eventually she experiences *adaptation*—which "involves changing ourselves to better fit into our new environment. It implies that we learn new things, adopt new behaviour, see things in a new light, and so on" (Shaules 83). Keenan adapts again and again to make the trailing spouse lifestyle work for her.

These principles of resistance, acceptance, and adaptation are present in all the expatriate narratives discussed here, reflecting not just the basic fact of experiencing

⁷⁸ Joseph Shaules, The Intercultural Mind: Connecting Culture, Cognition and Global Living (London: Intercultural Press, 2015)

cultural difference but the deeper reactions when the identity is called into question with the choice to live in a foreign country. Mayes resists the Italian principles of time management when it comes to getting any work done for her renovation, but by the end of the narrative she laughs instead of screams when part of the ceiling crumbles over her head and into her freshly made salad. Adam, in Leaving the Atocha Station, resists taking part and investing himself in his new life and friends, yet by the end he is collaborating with others and publishing his work.

The individual approach of each narrative type to the threat to self within a foreign culture sets these narratives apart. How the threat to self is experienced as well as the why behind the need for acceptance and adaptation marks these narratives as different from one another. Threats to self and identity in the sabbatical expatriate narrative are the minor inconveniences of being somewhere foreign. The why behind the sabbatical expatriate's acceptance and adaptation to difference is because their goal is long term settlement; they wanted an alternative and accept the one they find. The bohemian expatriate narrative shows more psychological threats that stem from self-doubt about being new and one's ability to change. It shows acceptance and adaptation as part of the goal of experimentation; if one thing isn't working, something else must be tested, though the doubt as to the efficacy of the experiment remains. The trailing spouse expatriate narrative displays actual threats to identity in the sacrifices constantly demanded to maintain the lifestyle. They must accept difference and adapt at the risk of losing themselves or the marriage.

There are qualities of each of these categories within my own creative narrative, which complicates the thesis by proving that these categories are far from perfect and certainly not exclusive. My narrative does not share the same sense of duality as Frances

Mayes in Under the Tuscan Sun; where she compares her lives in two countries based on her houses and how she spends her time, the only subject from home I focused on was my family (a subject she kept vague and, in the background). But the idea that moving abroad would expand her horizons is one I shared. Perhaps the reason I focused more on my family was because of my continued dependence on them; Mayes was rebuilding herself after divorce, after her children were grown and gone. Though the narratives focus on expansion, Mayes is also focused on recovery, whereas my narrative has more in common with the bohemian sense of experimentation and doubt. Though Adam creates a far more convoluted virtual world than the one presented in my narrative, the focus in both stories was the attempt to create a better life complete with our best selves, only for the actual to step in and remind us that we cannot escape the people we were at home just because we are now living abroad. One is only virtual and anonymous in a new place until the responsibility of relationships grounds us in the actual. And in my narrative, like that of Keenan's trailing spouse memoir, the actual that breaks into the cosy, pretty world of the virtual is the fear of losing oneself completely in another, losing one's agency and independence due to reliance on another.

All these narratives express hope in the possibilities offered through expatriation. They all show hardships brought on by different expectations and different approaches to new environments. Moving abroad brings with it concerns about identity and one's ability to adapt—feeling unbalanced at home, a fear of dependence on others, and the hope of doing or being something new. And though those concerns might overlap within the different categories laid out in this thesis, keeping them from being perfectly distinct, I believe that the categories might act as an aid in the understanding of the different types of expatriate narratives that continue to proliferate today.

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