

What I Wore Then

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a collection of personal narrative essays about journeys. Specifically, this work includes stories of journeys from my life and those close to me, each focusing on or seen through the lens of a specific issue or theme. The journeys in each of these sections contemplate relationships, personal realizations, and lessons learned from these experiences. Although travel is a component of some of these pieces, the focus of this thesis goes beyond travel writing. These stories are about both physical journeys that convey a movement from point A to point B, as well as about journeys of a more spiritual or emotional nature.

INTRODUCTION

Each essay in this collection of work details a personal journey. Primarily focusing on life in my twenties, these stories include literal trips and travels, as well as journeys that I have traversed in spirit. In writing and piecing together these essays, I have again journeyed to places unknown, as writing has a way of forcing you to learn things about yourself, or at least come to terms with a thing you have been avoiding. The subjects I've written about here, about my relationships with the people that mean the most to me, the people I was once close with and no longer know, wanderlust, growing up, and independence, are only unique in the way that I have experienced them. I hope that readers of this collection recognize something of their own experiences in mine, and perhaps feel less strange, or alone, as so many works of other essayists have done for me. I hope that these pieces make people laugh, empathize, and want to travel—even if it's just for a solo walk through the woods.

HEAVY MEDAL

“Looks like its supposed 2 thunderstorm. you think I should still try 2 run?” 4:34 PM

“Radar shows just showers passing thru, u should b fine. C u this weekend.” 4:36 PM

Outside the grimy metro window, people whizzed by in their cars as they drove alongside the train, all of us headed away from the city. I assumed that, like me, most of them worked at offices in D.C—at non-profits and law firms and banks and PR companies. Although I was 26, I still often looked to my parents, who lived in nearby Fairfax, for guidance. I was hoping my dad would suggest I reschedule the 10-mile run I had planned for the evening, due to the possibility of a storm. But now that my weather-nerd father had nixed that threat, I had no more excuses. I might have had more motivation had my mom or dad been running with me that evening, as they sometimes did, but today I was running solo.

The run was supposed to be part of my training for an upcoming half-marathon, my third one since making a commitment to myself to run one a year. Thus far, I had collected a medal from the Philly Half Marathon, as well as a lobster claw medallion from the Mount Desert Island half, a beautiful race along the coast of the popular Maine vacation spot. If all went according to plan, in a few weeks I'd be picking up a shiny new

Hokie Bird medal at the finish of the Hokie Half Marathon in Blacksburg, Virginia, where I had attended college at Virginia Tech, more than four years ago.

Despite all this, I still didn't consider myself a true "runner," and I certainly didn't love the act of running itself—what I enjoyed was the feeling of accomplishment that running, and finishing races, gave me. No matter how much I hated going through the motions—picking one leg up and propelling forward, dragging the rest of myself behind—I usually felt physically and emotionally cleansed afterwards, heavy with exhaustion but somehow lighter. But now, after a long day of work and commuting, I wasn't thinking about the after, I was dreading all that came before.

Although I normally ran with my parents or a friend on the weekends when I was training, I had been busy the previous Saturday and Sunday, or perhaps hung-over, and thus had to run after work if I wanted to stay on schedule. Once I reached the end of the Orange line at Vienna metro station where I normally continued on by bus or car to my apartment, I instead begrudgingly changed clothes in my car under the dim cover of the parking garage and headed a short ways to a parking lot behind a Whole Foods. Here I would pick up the Washington and Old Dominion Trail, known as the W&OD—a popular biking and running path that spans from Purcellville, Virginia to D.C. The warm and bright September afternoon meant that there were plenty of other people out on the trail with me: walking groups of young teachers hashing out the day's gossip, bikers flicking their bells as they whizzed by, student athletes conditioning for team sports, dog-walkers.

During short runs, I usually listened to music for motivation and to pass the time, but on longer ones I went without, so that I wouldn't drain my battery too fast and to better be aware of my surroundings. So on a day like today, all I had to occupy myself was me. As my legs pumped through the first few miles, slowly passing by sprawling suburban backyards, thickets of prickly bushes, and overhanging branches drooping with wine-colored berries, I thought about how I would have rather been doing anything else. I thought about how, about this time a year ago, I had been planning my wedding. Since then, I had been forced to realize that plans were only plans—no matter how much you prepare for something, no matter how certain you are, life unfolds however the hell it wants to. In recent months, my then-fiancé Richard had backed out of our half-planned wedding, and our relationship had fallen apart. Until then, we had shared seven years together. We had grown into adults as a pair, studied together, ate together, slept together, and sometimes, ran together. His family, immigrants from Ghana, had accepted me as one of their own, and my parents saw Richard as their son. Now, I thought about how the person that I had loved my entire adult life, still loved, was not running beside me. He was not up ahead of me as he had been on so many other trails, on other days, just barely visible in the distance.

A brown wooden post, painted with a yellow number 14, appeared as I rounded a curve in the paved asphalt of the two-lane path, meaning I had just reached mile four of my run. I had another mile to go before I could turn around and complete the remaining five miles. Angry frustration was slowly burrowing into my limbs, entwining itself with

memories and fibers of muscle, like the brittle vines coiling around the power lines that criss-crossed the trail above me. Training for a half-marathon was just wedding planning in a different form. Weeks and months of preparation, filled with highs and lows, lead somewhere—but it's not always the destination you intend.

I was tired—despite being only a few weeks away from the race, the miles were still difficult—I yearned to feel lighter, be more conditioned, for my lungs to churn out breaths more easily. My lower legs and back nagged at me, as if to remind me that I didn't have a body for running, that I was just an imposter, propelling slowly forward, clunky and awkward rather than swift and agile. I felt sorry for myself and thought pathetic things--comparing myself to skinnier friends, who hadn't run a mile since gym class. My mind selectively glossed over other, true things--like how I consumed more calories than I should—that my love for carbohydrates and grease and cheese and craft beer was why I needed to be out there on that path.

That's why I'm out here, I tried telling myself. *You have to do this so you can eat the shit you want to*. I started to imagine calories vaporizing one by one, exploding in little clouds of dust, just like the puffs of powdery spores that would billow from the poisonous mushrooms that grew in my parents' backyard when my sister and I would squish them as kids. After what seemed like a thousand exploding puffs of dust, I reached mile 4.5.

Seeing the mile marker, I slowed my pace and took a few gulps of lukewarm water from my camelback. I reached into my pack for one of the boxes of raisins my mom had recently given me to keep on hand in case of low blood sugar. As a Type 1

Diabetic, I need to stay active to keep healthy, yet exercise often burns off the energy in my bloodstream at an accelerated rate, so I have to refuel with carbohydrates. The raisins slid out of their small red box in one sticky mass, bonded by the afternoon heat. I tossed the raisin-ball into my mouth and chewed quickly. My mom was always plying me with juice boxes and gummy snacks--sources of quick carbs in case of emergency. I thought of her as I looked at the young maiden staring pleasantly up at me from the now empty box. Her expression seemed to convey joy at having provided me such sustenance, but she was also somewhat smug, as if she were telling me, "I told you you would need these." Her face disappeared as I crumpled the box in my fist. The sudden burst of sugar staved off the shakes that would have eventually come, but it didn't change my mood. I contemplated turning around—if I did so now, I would come up a mile short, but I could make it up later.

I had just come over the crest of a hill and was about to pause and turn on my heel, but as I reached the top, two people came into view ahead of me on the path, running in the same direction. A young man and woman, about my age I guessed, were jogging together, the woman slightly ahead of the man. Her long glossy ponytail swayed back and forth with each pace. Every so often she turned around to say something to the man. He kept in stride with her, but his movements were different, not as fluid. He was running on two prosthetic legs.

The lower portions of both legs were not made of flesh and bone but of curved metal. Pieces and parts were somehow fit together to create two knees, calves, feet. His back to me, I found I couldn't look away as he launched himself forward, pushing off of

each artificial limb. From the thighs up, he looked like any other athlete. I could see his upper back and shoulder muscles contracting beneath his sweat-soaked t-shirt.

“C’mon!” I could hear the woman yell back to him, firmly but kindly, a wide smile on her face. “We’re almost there, just one more mile to go!”

I couldn’t hear if he said anything in response, but he continued to move forward, his quad muscles commanding the rest of the leg—plastic, metal, and carbon-fiber. I had seen images of Oscar Pistorius, the ‘Blade Runner,’ competing in the Olympics and various world championships, sprinting at top speed, moving in the same way as the runners with natural legs did. But this man didn’t have the same easy strides. He moved his legs forward by thrusting them in small outward circles. Despite his visible strength, each step was an undertaking that required him to dig deep within his core.

The subconscious anger I was feeling faded into guilt. At the end of the day, I still had two legs that I could feel, pain and all. Pain helps remind us that we are alive. Whatever obstacles the man ahead of me had overcome to get to the point where he was that day, had no doubt taken him to some of his darkest hours. But here he was, living and thriving and as far as I could tell not complaining.

As I began to close the distance between myself and the two runners, I knew there was no question that I could and would finish the full ten miles I had set out to run. In another moment I had reached them, and as I passed, something rose in my chest. I wanted to shout out, “keep it up, you’re doing great!” or to somehow tell him thank you, for inspiring me, but I feared whatever words I managed would sound condescending. Instead I passed silently, wishing he could know what the sight of him did for me.

I finished mile five quickly. The physical challenges of running were temporary, and I had overcome them before. Staying mentally strong would be the real challenge. Not getting discouraged with what life threw at me. I couldn't control that, but I could choose how to react. In every race, there are a multitude of variables that can affect how you feel and how you perform. The temperature, the terrain, how many water stations there are. Blood sugar levels, stretching, your mood, dehydration—and whether you went a little overboard with “carbo-loading” and had two plates of spaghetti washed down with some beers the night before. Halfway through the race, you might suddenly cramp up and have to walk for a whole mile. But until that happens, you do the best you can.

For months, I had been wondering what path I would end up on, now that my life-plan had dissolved. Where would I be in five years? Would I end up alone, would I have children too late? I wanted my heart to stop being so heavy in my chest. Each day it felt as though it would drop straight down, floating slowly through my plasma and amongst my organs, through the tunnel of my left leg, landing with a soft thud to rest on the inside of the sole of my foot. Take things as they come, I told myself. Take each mile, one by one.

—*****

The second leg of my run began much better than the first. I smiled at people I passed. Sometimes another runner and I would exchange a knowing head nod, as if to say “we share something. We're out here, in this together.” But the bright afternoon began turning into a cloudy evening, and soon, more and more time passed between each person I saw. Light rain started to fall. I tried to maintain my newfound conviction, but as it grew

darker, bellows of thunder threatened from above. I was still four miles out when lightning began to periodically flash up ahead, stretching electric fingers across the sky, in the direction of my car.

I quickened my pace but was careful not to exert myself too much, I wanted enough energy to get back. The light rain that had been refreshing at first soon turned to fast, fat drops. Pausing for just a moment under a tree, I reached back into my pack for my phone. I *was* going to finish my run, but I thought it best to text my dad and let him know where I was on the trail.

The papery leaves of the small tree I stood under did nothing to keep the sheets of rain from drenching me and my phone. I typed in vain on the wet screen, but with no dry surface to wipe it with, I wasn't able to text or call. I tucked the phone back into the innermost pocket of my pack, hoping that it would somehow stay dry enough to remain functioning.

No matter, I thought. It was better to get going where I was going than to remain under a tree in a lightning storm. With three miles left, the rain was relentless, and lightning now cracked across the sky directly above me—ripping brilliant gashes in the clouds, leaking more rain and thunder. I couldn't recall a time when I had felt more saturated—rain cascaded in streams off my arms and legs. It pooled in the folds of my t-shirt and soaked the fabric between my shorts, leaving my ample inner thighs rubbed raw. My fingers were wrinkled like the raisins I had held not long ago. I started to imagine my skin sliding off my body due to the weight of the water logged epidermis, slowly melting into folds at my feet, like a mascot shedding his costume. I wondered what would be

revealed underneath, and pictured not muscle and bone but the rods of carbon fiber of the man I had seen earlier.

I was less than two miles from my car when the rain dissipated, but thunder still rolled in the distance, following little bursts of light. I passed no one. The clouds were dissolving, letting light from a setting sun filter through. In some places, the trail was now lined by the backs of houses, but for long stretches, I was still surrounded on either side by only thick trees. Here and there, smaller paths intersected the trail, leading out of the woods. The temperature was rising again and a mist was swirling off the pavement. I began to realize that I was utterly alone in my immediate environment. It was dim, everyone else had long ago taken shelter, and my phone was temporarily useless. I kept running.

Finally, I saw a yellow “18”—a shining beacon in the distance. I had a mere mile to go. My will was strong, but my legs were reaching their limit—they would keep going, but only so fast. My lower back was no longer nagging, but screaming. My already pounding heart began to throb even more so, when I saw someone moving beyond the mile marker post. A man, shrouded in a black hoodie, was walking in my direction.

I told myself to *keep going keep going keep going*. I was gross and sweaty, and strong. The man had no interest in me. But since I could not shake the sudden fear that had bubbled up inside me, I swung my pack off onto one shoulder and dug down into the bottom for my phone. My fingers still felt damp but were dry enough to unlock the screen. The man and I were fast approaching each other. 3, 2, 1--the seconds ticked in my mind.

“Hello?” My dad picked up, right at 0. My path had crossed with the shrouded man and I was still running. I looked back after a moment and saw him still going on his way, adjusting his soaked hood. He was just getting to where he was going, probably caught in the storm unaware, like me.

“Hey, are you okay? I texted you a bunch of times--”

“Yeah—sorry, it was too wet to respond, I’m almost done. Hey, can you just stay on the phone with me for a minute?”

I remained on the phone with my dad for the next few minutes, barely able to talk as I picked up speed, drawing on the last of my energy. The connection to his voice, miles away, calmed me slightly—but I had to move my own legs, pump my arms. Another man passed on his bike, but I was running too fast. I was leaving him behind.

“I can see the road, I’m good now,” I told my dad. “I’ll let you guys know when I’m home.”

Within moments, I had emerged from the tree-shrouded portion of the trail, and sprinted across the road and just beyond to the parking lot where my CR-V waited for me, sparkling with raindrops under a streetlight. I quickly grabbed a towel from my trunk and laid it on the driver’s seat, simultaneously throwing my pack with the camelback into the passenger area. Water still squelched beneath me as I lowered myself into the seat. I shut the door and locked it, turned the key in the ignition. I felt a few hot tears steam down my already wet cheeks. I had run ten miles before, even more than that. But none of it had been like today.

When my engagement ended, and then eventually my relationship, I became wary of getting excited about anything. I didn't want to invest emotions in other people. Didn't set aside time to plan any trips, or even a night out—things that usually made me happy-- because I was afraid of being let down. I stopped moving for a while.

When you run a race, the only person who can get you from the start to the finish line is yourself. Cheering of the people on the side-lines helps; a friend or parent can run just ahead and urge you to keep going. But you still have to move your own legs. That's why the happiness I feel after finishing a run is so powerful—it's tied to only me, it doesn't rely on someone or something else. Running helped me stop letting *myself* down.

Each time I earn a new race medal, whether from a 5K or a half marathon, I add it to a peg on the wall in my bedroom. They've all become a tangled mess of metal and ribbon, gently knocking against the wall whenever someone in my apartment shuts a door too hard. The quiet thud is comforting—a weighty reminder of the many miles I've run, and the many more I have to go.

*

SHED

In a narrow, brightly lit hallway at the back of Masa 14, a D.C. bar and lounge, I waited for the women's restroom to become vacant. For the girls, there were two single-stall bathrooms, for guys there was a communal urinal. I knew because of the glimpses of men with their back to me that I was getting as the door swung open and then closed at the end of the hallway.

The ladies were taking forever, as usually seems to be the case (I however pride myself on being a fast pee-er). I watched discreetly as two traditionally attractive men walked out of the bathroom. I had seen them taking up more space than necessary in the cramped bathroom and could hear them laughing from behind the door. The pair walked back towards the main bar and dining room, and me, with exaggerated swagger. The taller of the two had the same proportions and hair color as a Ken doll, and his tight pink t-shirt seemed to be choking the life from his biceps. As Ken passed me, he suddenly stuck out his hand, awaiting a high-five.

Taken aback, I began to instinctively reach out, to comply with his silent request. But then, I'm still not sure why—maybe because I didn't like the way he smacked his gum, or because I subconsciously labeled him a douchey frat boy, I pulled my arm back just as quickly.

“Sorry--you just used the bathroom?” I said in an almost pleading tone, trying to come up with a viable excuse for not making contact while still coming off as friendly. My exchange with Ken was so fleeting that he never even stopped walking down the hall as he passed, but after I muttered words in his presence, I saw his eyes quickly bulge. He hadn’t been smiling to begin with but his gum-smacking mouth stopped chewing long enough to pull into a tight, straight line. Ken hadn’t expected this response. *I* hadn’t expected this response.

Ken passed, and with his back now towards me, without ever looking back, he simply said, “Weight Watchers.” He said it calmly, his voice deep. His ability to simultaneously insult me and act as though nothing had happened was almost impressive—his tone, the way he had disappeared, never pausing as he spoke—it all came off as though he was simply making a comment about amateur graffiti on a brick wall.

The little nickname stung more than it should have. After taking a second to process that *yes, he did just call you that*, an image of myself with a “Hello, my name is Weight Watchers” sticker popped into my head. I instantly felt ashamed, my blood hot and limbs heavy with adrenaline. I was suddenly very aware of *me*—my body and the space it took up.

For a moment I tried to come up with something to clap back with, to save my dignity before he was out of range. What about, “HA. I *am* on weight watchers!” the

voice inside my head urged. He couldn't call me on something I already knew, the voice said. Thankfully, I didn't listen.

Instead, I zoomed into the now vacant bathroom I'd been waiting for and turned the metal lock behind me. I stared at myself in the mirror and fanned my flushed cheeks, hoping it would stop the onslaught of saltwater building at the lower rims of my eyes, threatening to spill over and take my mascara and eyeliner down with it. I was pissed at myself for letting Ken evoke such a reaction. Yet, I found myself in a familiar place—looking myself up and down in despair. Could people see the soft roll of stomach and skin that I detested most, through my flowy top? Did the others at the bar get hung up on the small tufts of fat that squished out at my armpits against my spaghetti straps? Did they wish that the denim shorts I was wearing covered more of my wide inner thighs?

Just a few moments earlier, I had felt good about myself—my low cut tank top showed off my modest but supple cleavage, my hair was brushed out into slightly frizzy, voluminous waves. My friends Madelyn and Kip had greeted me with excitement and warmth when Richard and I arrived that evening, and I was happy. I had Richard, my fiancé—a good man who loved me and whose bulging biceps, thick thighs, and sturdy chest still turned me on after years together. I loved to lie in bed and stare into his soft eyes, to brush my cheek against his black beard, to rub his velvety earlobe between my thumb and forefinger, when he tolerated it. Yet, Richard's affection for me didn't sway

how this man had made me feel. Why had two words been so successful in deflating my confidence?

Taking deep breaths, I thought about the handful of other times this sort of thing had happened. On the way to a college party a few years prior, I had been walking on the sidewalk with my friends when we passed another group. The other group didn't try to make room for any of us as we passed, and with rare sass I muttered, "excuse me!" as we went by. The lone boy walking among the gaggle of girls that we had just passed started to sing out "fat girl--fat girl--fat girl." None of my friends seemed to notice his chant, so I told myself he wasn't singing about me, even though I was the only fat one among us.

I've never liked the word "fat" and I've always struggled with what qualifies as fat. Like countless other people, I've struggled with my weight all my life, yet even at my heaviest I refused to think that I was a fat person; I knew I was heavier than average, but in my mind, "fat" was reserved for *really* big people, and even then it seemed a harsh, even cruel term. My current roommate, Jessica, tells me she's fat—she tells me that although she thinks herself gorgeous, she has no trouble saying she's fat because to her, the excessive weight she gained a few years ago means she is fat. Yes, Jessica is bigger than I am, and yes her extra weight has been a burden to her social life and health. But it still makes me uncomfortable when she so strongly asserts her fatness. She's okay with it though, she says, because on the inside, she is still the skinny dancer she was throughout college.

When Jessica first moved in to the apartment we share, she spent several hours setting up and arranging her colorful dresses and many high-heeled shoes in her new walk in closet. She showed me the shoes with pride and took great care in their display.

“I haven’t been able to wear them in a while, since gaining more weight” she had said, suddenly a bit solemn.

“Oh, tell me about it,” I responded, in a show of solidarity. “People don’t believe me but I seriously gain weight in my feet too.

“Oh, no--” Jessica said, “I gained so much that the heels won’t support my weight right now.” I’m taken aback, never having considered that someone’s heels wouldn’t be able to hold them up. I can see just a hint of sadness on Jessica’s face—not because she is sad to be fat, but sad that she cannot do or wear something she truly loves, that she feels is part of who she is.

Jessica plans to lose the weight and then start seriously dating again, because according to her, to start looking for love before shedding her pounds, would be to find someone who liked a version of herself she didn’t really identify with.

In front of the mirror, dabbing my face with a course paper towel, I tried to focus on the weight that I’d lost so far. I sat down to pee, and started to get angry.

Fuck him. Hypothetical situations ran through my head.

At first, during the conversation I had with him in my mind, I ridiculed Ken for how stupid he was: “*Do you think you were telling me something I didn’t already know,*

Kenny boy? Must feel pretty dumb to tell someone who sees their overweight selves in the mirror every day that they're overweight”.

But then, I changed course, perplexed as to why Ken reached out to me in the first place--he couldn't have thought that I was such a heifer that he didn't want to high-five me. He probably thought I was attractive—a big girl but attractive nonetheless. His high school barb was his way of dealing with rejection.

Knowing that if I remained looking in the mirror any longer I would only get more upset, I left the bathroom. Rushing back down the hallway, I slipped into the dark dining room like a slinking cat. No one else had heard what Ken said, or seen my eyes start to water, but I felt branded, felt as though I was now suddenly a target of ridicule. I wanted to find my companions and blend into them, hiding as well as showing to my nonexistent onlookers that I was not here alone--I had people. To my shock, when I returned to Richard and our friends, my face didn't betray me. No one asked what was wrong—my secret was safe. What must have lasted only a few moments, including the solo pep talk in the bathroom, had seemed like an eternity. Richard handed me a mojito, grinning with a closed smile. Finding the small of his back, my hand presses into his soft shirt. The contact with his body, calmed me slightly as I continued to concentrate on acting like nothing had happened. I stuck the black straw from the drink in the corner of my mouth, sucking up the sweet and fizz.

For a moment I had considered pulling Richard or Madelyn aside to confide in them. Surely they'd both tell me there was nothing wrong with me, they'd find Ken, cuss him out or worse, my confidence redeemed. I craved other people's positive opinions of me. Compliments made me high. They reinforced my thinning reserves of self worth. But I thought better of it. Since I had met him shortly after graduating high school, Richard had never let anyone off the hook for even the slightest accidental insult towards me. I could now see Ken's back again, his pink shirt a soft purple sitting under the dark bulbs lighting the bar. He was having trouble getting a drink--there were too many people.

"Let's go *dance!*" Madelyn said, breaking my stare. I opened my eyes wide as I started to agree--I hadn't realized I'd been squinting hard, glaring in Ken's direction.

As a child, I never knew that I was a chunky kid, it wasn't something that I thought about. Although I wore size 12 shorts and large t-shirts, I ran around with all the other kids, had crushes on the same boys as my friends, played the same sports. It wasn't until middle school, when I rapidly lost weight and was subsequently diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes that I became suddenly aware of what my body looked like, and what others thought of it. Becoming skinny had revealed to me that I hadn't been skinny before—I received lots of compliments, from well-meaning people who didn't know that my weight loss was a side affect from going months with an undiagnosed chronic illness.

Suddenly, I felt awkward in my own skin. I had just been a nerdy kid who liked to have fun with friends, and now walking down the halls at school between classes made me feel nervous—what were people thinking about me when they saw me?

It wasn't until later in high school that I slowly started to gain weight again, but I remained slim and athletic until my second year of college. I was living in an apartment for the first time, drinking heavily, and beginning what would be a long-term relationship. At graduation, I was nearing 200 pounds, and needed to make a change.

At 5'5", I'm neither tall nor short. Clinically, I am obese, but hovering around a size 12, I am slightly slimmer than the average American woman who wears a size 16. I've always been active but by taking up running and joining Weight Watchers with my mom, I was able to lose twenty pounds. I see my body type in people like Lena Dunham, Amy Schumer, and Ashley Graham—they help me to feel more comfortable in my own skin, but keeping weight off and feeling confident is a constant physical and mental journey, that pulls me in different directions.

Madelyn leads the way up the stairs to the rooftop level of Masa 14. The inside bar area has the same bluish-purple lighting as the main level, but its squashed with bodies. There is also a small, outdoor section that's cooler, blacker with night. Richard is quiet—he's tired after hanging out with friends earlier in the day--but agrees to dance with me. I need to dance to shake off the funk I still feel. I'm not even focusing on Ken or

his words anymore, but rather on myself. The way my body feels clunky, and awkward. The way I feel that everyone is staring at me when no one is. I want to smile, laugh, be normal.

At the end of this night, I'll go home with Richard, and sleep soundly next to him, in his arms, the night's incident slowly fading away. And after this night, a few years later, I will rejoin Weight Watchers after gaining some stubborn weight back. But after this night, and after Ken, I am different. I strive to think more like my roommate Jessica, whose weight is separate from her identity. She owns her beauty and her personality, and doesn't care what any man or woman tells her. I will never be 100% happy with how I look, but I don't know anyone who is--and that's okay. I continue to work out and pick my battles with food, but the real work comes with liking who I am as a whole. What would be exposed, if I were to shed my skin, my fat, my nervous tissue? If we were all reduced to our bones and organs, we would only be judged by our spirits, our deeds, our character. Looking inwards, I don't like all that's there either. But it's mostly pretty in there. I'm kind and funny and generous, and I'm proud of that! And I can guarantee that under the surface, where it all matters, I've got Ken beat.

*

HANGING ON

A few months ago, I started dating someone new—a transportation broker named Ryan. He notices small details, points out little things about myself that I didn't think anyone noticed. Sweet things, like how many freckles my arms have or how I don't like it when someone looks unhappy. The second time he stayed the night with me at my apartment, he called to me while I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom.

“You have a shit ton of necklaces,” he said, with a hint of astonishment.

You don't have to be a particularly observant person to notice them—they hung on my wall next to my full-length mirror. I had to buy a large wooden wall mount with fifteen metal hooks—the kind meant to put coats on in one's mudroom—in order to hang all of them.

I recently moved back in with my parents, into the bedroom I grew up in. After moving out, it proved difficult to save money. My parents graciously offered to let me move back home for a while so that I could hopefully purchase a place of my own soon, and after several months of hesitation and internal debate, I agreed. However, during the two years I had been gone, my parents had turned my bedroom into a nice guest room. Not wanting to mess up the new fabric wall he had installed, my dad instead opted to hang my necklace rack in a smaller, less-used room next to mine—where there's a large comfy chair, bookcases stuffed with books, and kitty litter boxes for our three cats.

Hesitant to let me hang it up at all at first, my dad gave in, knowing how much they mean to me, but still tried to keep them out of sight by obscuring them behind the door. The rack of hanging beads and baubles is so large however, that you cannot open the door of the small room completely. At times, I feel as though I have taken a step backward on the path that I wanted to follow, and I miss my privacy. But living in the house I grew up in has been rather comforting. I enjoy hanging out with my parents as adults, and getting more home-cooked meals than I would otherwise. And now my mom gets to borrow my necklaces again.

Most of my necklaces aren't the dainty kind, encrusted with gems or with thin gold or silver chains. I have one or two of those from when my grandma died, and a few I've recently purchased now that delicate chains are more in style, but all of my other necklaces are what some would describe as costume jewelry, or statement necklaces. They're beaded, ornamental, long strands with big pendants. They're brightly colored and made of resin, wood, and cheap metal and plastic. Hanging and clustered together from their hooks, they look like a beaded curtain.

As I've amassed these necklaces over a long period of time, I've gotten emotionally attached to them, some more than others, maybe a little bit more than I should be of something that is ultimately just a decoration for the throat or chest. If a clasp or link breaks, which they so often do when made cheaply like mine, I wince, and scramble with thick fingers to try to pinch and prod it back together. I get a sense of pride when I look at them there on the wall. I'm proud of the antique store finds, and the ones that seem to complete an outfit perfectly, or the go-to picks that I can grab when I'm in a

hurry. I don't wear a necklace every day, but I feel more complete when I do. There's something so aesthetically pleasing about filling the gap between collar line and chin with a nice chunky necklace.

Just as a particular scent can elicit a certain memory—like the smell of Herbal Essences shampoo being forever linked to showers in my freshman dorm--I can look at a particular necklace and be reminded of a happy memory from a time when I wore it.

There's a necklace--a circular, silver metal band--that I received as a gift years ago for my birthday. It's from a catalogue that no longer exists—one that I imagine more elderly ladies frequently ordered from, called *Simply Whispers*. The band of the necklace is just slightly larger than that of a choker, with a flat, resin-filled, oval pendant. The pendant is a translucent turquoise color, with flecks of fake mica or mother of pearl. This is one of my staples. This necklace makes me feel confident—like an Egyptian queen. I wore this to one of the first parties I ever attended in college, which happened to be a highlighter party. It added a touch of pizzazz to the plain white tee that I donned, on which my fellow freshmen could scribble as we imbibed under the black lights. I was third-wheeling it that night as I tagged along with my hall-mate Nikki and her boyfriend Jimmy. When it was their turn on the beer pong table, I was left to awkwardly stand and watch. So when a male partygoer came up to me to tell me, very enthusiastically, that he liked my necklace, it really made my night. I had never spoken more than a few words to any dude who wasn't dating one of my friends, let alone received a compliment from one, so from then on, the Egyptian goddess necklace was worn whenever I was hanging around a crush, or needed a pick me up.

Having lived with other women in college and at home, I have often found myself in situations where I am asked to share my necklaces. My roommates would count on me to lend them a pretty strand for a night out when their minimal selection didn't cut it. When I lived at home after graduating from college, my mom sometimes asked me in the mornings, as we both got ready for work, if she could borrow a necklace. My sister would simply sneak into my room and take what she pleased. She even "accidentally" packed one of my favorites, a magenta pennant necklace, in her suitcase when she was returning to college for a spring semester. I don't mind sharing things. But every time one of my beaded baubles is taken, to be worn on someone else's neck, I can't help but get a little anxious. What if they snag it on something? What if they lose it? What if they take the credit when someone says, "Ooo I like your necklace!" Compliments like those are common in the women's restroom during nights of heavy drinking, and often lead to temporary new friendships.

These fears are valid. A few years ago, one of my best friends, Carrie, whom I had lived with in college called me up.

"You'll never guess what I just found." She said excitedly.

I didn't.

"Your orange necklace!"

Orange necklace, orange necklace.... I thought to myself, trying to figure out what she meant. Then it hit me. *My orange necklace.* It had been one of my go-to's. I had been missing this beloved chain for years now, and had given up on ever finding it. It had been long and gold, with sections of orange resin beading. I had owned it since high school.

After one night in college, when she borrowed it to adorn her outfit for a party, “the orange necklace” as Carrie had dubbed it, somehow ended up in her jacket pocket, where it remained for three years. I was of course ecstatic that it was no longer lost and would be mailed back to me, but still, I gritted my teeth thinking about how I had been apart from it, and about all the outfits I had worn that had been missing the final touch that only the orange necklace could have provided.

Sadly, this happy ending hasn’t yet happened with one of my other favorite necklaces that has been missing for years now. I first spotted it after graduating high school, at an antique store in Columbus, Ohio. The shopkeeper saw me fingering the green, chain-link necklace, and told me that it was made in the 1940’s, out of Lucite. I loved the heavy feel of it in my hands, and admired the tiny white rhinestones inlaid in some of the translucent green links. It reminded me of sea glass. Seeing the \$14 price tag I knew it was a great find. But when the shopkeeper rang me up, I was taken aback when he said I owed over \$40. I had mistaken an inventory label for the price tag. Being much younger then, I didn’t have \$40 to spend on a necklace, as beautiful as it was, and begrudgingly found myself putting it back on its display, among other less-attractive ones.

My dad and sister, who had been with me in that antique store, returned to Columbus that year for an Ohio State football game. They went back to the antique store and saw the necklace was still there, bought it for me, and kept it a secret until Christmas. To this day, I think that was one of the sweetest gifts I have ever received. So when I look back and see photos of myself wearing it, my heart gets a little heavy thinking about

how I no longer have it. I don't know what happened—I do know that my sister is wearing it in several photos from a beach trip we took, and that that is the last time I remember seeing it, but trust me, I searched her room high and low, and know that it's not in her possession. I'm still keeping my fingers crossed that I'll be reunited with it some day.

There's another necklace I have, with large, chocolate-colored wooden beads threaded around a green cord. This one is special because I bought it in Camden Market when I was studying abroad in London. But I didn't just purchase it, I *bartered* for it. I had been eager to try out the whole haggling thing ever since I heard that that was how things worked in the open-air markets of London, but when it came time to do so, I found that I was very nervous. The price tag on the necklace was £17.

"I'll give you s-six pounds for it..." I told the man who was running the tent, my palms sweaty. I had started to worry that maybe I was wrong about bartering being acceptable here. What if he was offended by my offer?

"Ten." He said flatly.

"Ok." I said without hesitation. I had received enough thrills out of the one round of bartering and was happy to take my necklace and go. I now wear it every time I wear my green Zara dress.

Pieces of jewelry hold a lot of symbolic meaning, or emotional value to many of us. Think of the man who has kept his grandmother's antique engagement ring for years, waiting for the right woman to propose to, because the ring reminds him of his beloved Grammy and his fiancé will no doubt adore it despite the collage of princess cut rings she

has on her Pinterest board. Or the earrings that a little girl has admired on her mother since she was young, and hopes to give to her own daughter some day.

A few years ago, my mom gave me a necklace, with strands of purple garnet beads that meet together at a silver sphere. It feels pleasantly cool and heavy against my chest when I wear it. The garnets in the necklace remind me of a gift that I gave to her on her fiftieth birthday.

I had been surfing the net one day when I came across a necklace on Etsy, the ever-popular online shop for artisans and lovers of hand-made goods. The necklace featured a halved pomegranate charm, handcrafted out of distressed copper, as well as garnets meant to portray the juicy seeds inside. Not only was it stunning and unique, but it had instantly reminded me of the dual memoir *Traveling with Pomegranates* by Sue Monk Kidd and her daughter Ann Kidd Taylor. My mom had given this book to me, after she read it herself, before I went off to study abroad for a month. The book is the story of the author and her daughter as they travel together in Greece and France, both discovering things unknown about themselves, and each other. In the book, the mythological story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, who is abducted by Hades and given a pomegranate to eat, plays a significant role as Kidd reflects on her relationship with her daughter while they are in Greece. This prompts her to purchase a set of matching pomegranate necklaces when she sees them in a shop window.

The pomegranate pendant seemed so perfect—everything from the garnets which were my mom's favorite gemstone, to the significance of the pomegranate necklaces in the mother-daughter relationship in Kidd's memoir and how it had parallels to my own

relationship with my mom. So I gritted my teeth and clicked “purchase”, trying to forget about the price, which was much higher than that of any necklace I would buy for myself. My mom now keeps it in her jewelry box, separate from all of *her* more costume-y necklaces hanging on the wall in her closet. Every time she wears it I’m filled with a secret satisfaction and joy.

As much as I admire many of the necklaces people have gifted to me over the years, I have guiltily stowed some away, most likely never to be worn. In most cases, these necklaces have been presents from my maternal grandmother, Nana Sue. I love my Nana Sue dearly, and she is always thoughtful in picking out things for her granddaughters, or anyone really, but for some reason her taste clashes with mine in the most unfortunate manner.

Usually from a craft-show or some sort of school fundraiser, I have received several of these unsightly necklaces from my Nana Sue. One such necklace included a long black plastic cord, with an abstract, cartoonish cutout made of clay on the end. The cluster of black and white putty even *glowed in the dark*. Another was made entirely of brown and gold seed beads, featuring a tan glass object the size of a golf ball. I was sure that my elderly third grade teacher, Mrs. Henry, had worn something just like it. The necklaces from Nana Sue still go on the rack with the others, but I don’t recall ever wearing them.

My necklace collection has obviously come quite a long way since the days of plastic tattoo necklaces, beaded pieces of string spelling out my name, and a jagged half of a heart signifying that my best friend had the other piece. It was only a couple years

ago that I was even able to part ways with the pieces of ribbon and elastic bands that were popular to wear as chokers in early high school, even though they actually felt like they *were* choking you a little. Now, of course, chokers have come roaring back in style. A young woman recently tweeted about a night she spent at the bar, in which she wore a black Nike shoe lace around her neck as a choker. Her tweet thanked Nike because she had never received as many compliments on something as she had on that shoelace. Her tweet went viral. I think back to pieces of plastic from soda bottles I used to fashion into bracelets when I was younger, and the varied elastics from packaging I'd scrounge up and wear around my neck. If only Twitter had been around back then!

It's hard for me to get rid of a necklace that's become broken. Sometimes, pieces will break off or beads will get lost, or something else happens that proves unfixable. Yet throwing a necklace in the trash is like prying off a fingernail for me. My fascination with these symbols of femininity goes back to early childhood.

Growing up, I'd always cringe at the scene in Disney's *Pocahontas* when the character Kocoum gets shot—not necessarily because he dies, but because as he falls down he grabs out at Pocahontas and his hand catches on her iconic teal necklace, breaking it into pieces. When I was in daycare, I envied the necklace of a friend who had me convinced that the three different colored plastic pieces around her neck were flavored like strawberry, blueberry, and watermelon. I would look on silently as she would pick up the necklace off her chest and stick one of the pieces in her mouth, sucking on it vigorously. And when I later watched more mature movies, I couldn't help but stare at the cleavage of women like Kate Winslet in *Titanic*, when a well draped necklace drew

one's eye ever so strategically downwards. The blue diamond necklace Winslet's character Rose wore, called "The Heart of the Ocean," had quite a stunning effect on her bosom. I wanted to be one of those women someday, I thought.

Today, I care less about how a necklace might complement my cleavage, or lack thereof, but more about the story behind it, like the Lucite necklace from Columbus, or about how it reflects who I am and how I feel. I will wear my bedazzled Hello Kitty necklace with my head up high, because I've always adored her, and same goes for my red and gold sailboat necklace, which represents my love of all things nautical. But if I'm giving a presentation at work that I'm feeling nervous about, wearing a favorite necklace that looks good can help me get through it—like a petal-shaped emerald necklace that I wore when I gave a speech at my best friend's wedding—I felt confident then, and was able to be witty and sentimental at the same time in my deliverance. Seeing that necklace reminds me of that occasion, and the fact that I can do it again, that I don't need to be nervous. And wearing necklaces from loved ones makes me think of the person who gave it to me, whether they are here today or have passed on.

Maybe I'll pass on the garnet necklace from my mom to a daughter or daughter-in-law someday. Whether she likes it and wears it to remember her old lady by, or hides it away like the necklaces from Nana Sue, as long as she finds her own style to wear unabashedly, I'll be happy.

Within the past few months, I've discovered that two of my necklaces, including my blue-resin party choker, are beginning to deteriorate. An unpleasant odor is left on my hands after I run my hands along them as I wear them, or fiddle with the clasp. The cheap

metal is rotting away. I can't get rid of them yet though. I'm still holding on to the memories.

A few years ago, my former fiancé Richard and I called off our wedding. It wasn't my decision, but it was one of the hardest things either of us had ever had to face before. For about two days, I couldn't do much but cry and lie in bed. But then in a burst of anger, I quickly scoured my room for things that had been given to me by Richard, so that I could vehemently throw them in the trash. I distinctly remember that there were three items that I scooped up in my arms—but the only one I clearly recall is a neon orange necklace Richard had given to me one Christmas. It wasn't expensive but I liked it a lot, and wore it with a black velvet Jessica Simpson dress one New Year's Eve. But even in my anger, I couldn't throw it away like garbage—I instead asked my mom to do something with it—give it away to someone at work, whatever. Getting rid of the necklace and the two other forgotten items satisfied my rage for the day, but I still think about the necklace, and Richard.

Valentine's Day was a few weeks ago, and among a number of other things, Ryan gifted me with a necklace. It was gold, with a row of cubic zirconia spheres. I immediately beamed up at him, expressing how much I liked it. He told me that he had seen similar necklaces on my Pinterest account, and thus got the idea to get me this one.

I hope to have a future with Ryan, but the truth is, he's the first person I've been serious with since being with Richard, and it will take me a long time to feel normal in a relationship sense. I don't know what lies ahead romantically. But Ryan's necklace now hangs on the hooks in the little room, perhaps in place of the orange necklace from

Richard. I can see the one from Ryan if I look hard for it, but it's obscured by the so many others--from relatives and friends and people who will always be in my life or always be a part of me—and also by the plentiful stands I've given to myself. They are a reminder that the person who knows me best, is me.

*

TAILLIGHTS AND TRUCKS

Nikki, Richard, and I are squeezed tight in the backseat of my mom's Subaru Forrester, with me in the middle. Dad's driving and my younger sister Sarah rides shotgun. Richard's solid thighs and wide shoulders dig into me, but I like it that way. We have all just enjoyed what I considered to be one of the best concerts I've ever attended—Foster the People at Meriwether Post Pavilion. Although the concert venue in Columbia, Maryland can be a two-hour drive from our suburban digs in Virginia, I love sprawling out on blankets on the lawn, peering down under the amphitheater roof to the stage, feeling the vibrations of live music through my chest.

My dad enjoys going to concerts with us—he has good taste in music and nothing makes him happier than spending time with us—his daughters, my fiancé, and friends like Nikki. He is included, he's hip, he's carefree. The show's encore is mind-blowing, with the beat so thick and pulsating you can rub it between your fingers. I turn my head from confetti and the giant dancing inflatable creatures that have just sprung up on the stage, and look back to see my Dad's head bobbing up and down. He mouths something to me like, "this is so cool." I can't help but laugh.

We've stayed for the whole concert, and the effects of the beers and gin and tonics we started drinking at the tailgate have long worn off. Following Dad's pace, we walk

quickly to the car, practically jogging at some points. I remember that it's Sunday, and I start worrying about how the next two hours will go.

We manage to scoot out of the parking lot pretty quickly, but soon we are part of a sea of red taillights. Dad lets out a loud, angry sigh. It's beginning, I think. I can tell Richard is thinking it too.

The summer before my freshman year of high school, our family of four was vacationing on Mt. Desert Island off the coast of Maine, as we had done several times before. My mom's side of the family hailed from Bangor and after years of visits to see them, my parents decided they wanted to spend more time on the coast and have our own property for vacations and family get-togethers—an escape from the hectic pace of every day life in northern Virginia.

Over the years my family has made the 12 to 14-hour trip to our camp in Maine, as we call it, so many times that even I can almost follow the route by heart—sometimes with friends along for the ride, sometimes with boyfriends. We've driven in my dad's Audi A6. We've taken jeeps and cars and trucks. For some trips we leave in the middle of the night, or right after work, sleeping in shifts. Other times we drag ourselves out of bed at the crack of dawn. The routine isn't the same each time but the travel plans are always orchestrated with the intent to one, maximize the amount of time at the destination, and two, avoid traffic at all costs.

On several occasions our treks have required two cars. This meant that one daughter would go with mom, the other with dad. Sarah and I love our parents both

equally but we secretly knew that both of us preferred to go with Mom. Mom didn't freak the fuck out when we hit traffic, or aggressively tailgate someone when they cut her off. She didn't let congested roads ruin almost the entire trip, or take her frustration out on whoever was in the car with her.

Usually by the time we have reached New Jersey (which my parents created their own chant for when we were younger—"the state-we-hate!") our car or caravan of travellers has run into some sort of hiccup, caused by an accident or construction, or just heavy traffic. Whether it turns out to be from a truck on fire or a horrible accident, my normally sane, caring father doesn't give a shit why the traffic is bad--he takes it personally.

I learned what my mom considers to be the worst cuss word at an early age, for two reasons. The first was that when Sarah was little, she had an odd obsession with trucks. Big rigs excited her so much that as a two or three year old, a large portion of her possessions were toy trucks. But she didn't call them trucks. Buckled up in her car seat, if Sarah saw a semi on the highway she'd squeal with delight and shout out "fwuck!"

The second way I learned what the F word was was from my father. The "fucking idiots" who decided to do construction at this hour were my dad's worst enemies. There were of course a few "god damns" and plenty of "assholes" on our drives but the F-bombs my dad drops are the real deal—that's when you know you are in for a long ride.

In addition to my education in cuss words, I also have Dad to thank for my first experience with the flipping of birds--perhaps around the time I was in second or third grade. We were on the main road in our neighborhood at dusk, almost home, when the

figure of a teenager appeared in the middle of the street—taking its time crossing, as most moody teens would. The horn blared and the brakes screeched. I could see the back of Dad’s then-thick black hair lean out the window to yell something obscene. As the boy passed and we continued driving, I turned to look out the back, mortified. The shrinking figure was sticking one arm in the air, with a finger extended. “He just flipped us off!” my dad grunted, incensed. There would be many more middle fingers, from both my dad and passersby, in the years to come.

If dad is in a good mood, which is normally the case when heading out on vacation, the likelihood of a road rage episode is less. Or at least the severity of his outbursts can be lesser. But if we run into traffic on the way *home* from a trip, then all hope is lost. As an aerospace engineer currently working as a proposal manager for a contractor that does work with the Department of Defense, Dad often deals with a lot of stress on the job—stress that comes home with him. Knowing that he is returning to work and the real world, he has no control over his emotions—his worries that were put on hold come flooding back.

His anger is not just reserved for trips home from vacation. If my dad is the driver on the way home from a Redskins game for example, unless it’s a really good game, we’ll probably leave early, halfway through the fourth quarter, so that we can avoid traffic and avoid his wrath. Getting stuck leaving a stadium with my dad is the last place you want to be. Our grandparents and family friends joke about it when we are all in the car, perhaps to lighten the mood, but no one is ever spared. Richard was well versed in Dad’s road rage. He never came out and said it, but sometimes Richard would choose not

to come because he didn't want to be around my dad when he got that way. I didn't want to either, but I wished that Richard would stick it out with me—together, it would be more tolerable.

A real estate agent sat in the passenger seat of our Dodge Durango and told my dad where to turn as we neared the next house we were going to view. It was the summer before I would begin high school. My parents hadn't yet found the right property in Maine, and we were on a quest, together as a family. The road leading to the remote lake was unpaved and bumpy, and sitting in the third row, I felt very carsick. I had gone in with the rest of my family to see the first three houses that day, but this time I opted to remain in the car when we arrived. Fat black mosquitos pelted the windows while I waited, as if they could sense my warm blood behind the glass. Some bounced off the surface and flew away, off to find an easier meal, but others seemed to stun themselves, and would spiral away, falling below my view. My head throbbed.

It was on the way back to the campsite we were staying at for two nights that my dad got a call from Gramma, saying that she had gone to the doctor after falling, a long bleeding gash after her leg gave out on the back porch steps. The leg had been bothering her. It was Cancer. We'd later learn that it had spread to her lungs, her brain, her ovaries—to everywhere.

As my dad relayed all this information to us, in a subdued state of shock, our poor real estate agent probably wished she had taken a separate car. She made a point to not stop talking for the remainder of the ride back. My mom and dad nodded and chuckled

and spoke here and there in response, politely and robotically. I now felt glad to be alone in the very back seat, literally walled off from the conversation and from everyone.

After camping one more night, Dad flew straight to Mansfield, Ohio to see Gramma. After Mom, Sarah and I finished out our week in Maine, we made the drive home, picked up the dog, and drove up to join them. Gramma seemed herself, but Dad was quiet. He was mad at Grampa Ron for not taking Gramma to the doctor much earlier. Grampa Ron was neither our grandfather, nor my dad's father, but Gramma had started dating him almost immediately after her first husband Frank Sr. passed away, when my dad was 14. Gramma said goodbye to Grandpa Ron and the rest of her family—a brother and sister and their spouses and children--before we loaded her in the car with us to head back to Virginia, where she would hopefully get better. The dog rested her head in Gramma's lap most of the way.

Gramma died that November. The next spring, my parents went by themselves to continue their search for an escape. They needed it more now than before. They found a little red house on a lake in Otis, not too far inland from Mt. Desert Island. Since then we've been making road trips there almost every summer, and sometimes for Christmas. We decorated one of the bathrooms with the seashell and starfish knickknacks from Gramma's house--her sand dollar wreath hangs on the wall and the hand towels embroidered with beach waves sit folded on the shelves above the toilet.

I know that Dad's road rage has always been an issue, but my memories of his outbursts and foul moods in the era before our Maine house and before Gramma passed

away are much lesser. Whether I just don't remember them well because I was younger, or whether the loss of his mother and only remaining parent changed things, I'm not sure. But as I got older, these incidents affected me more and more, and I began to argue with my dad. I'd ask him to calm down. I'd get angry myself, telling him he was being ridiculous, and that staring down or flipping off a driver who has pissed him off isn't a good idea. He'd yell back, only becoming more outraged.

On our trips to Maine, though, when we reached the state line after New Hampshire, us Perry women could collectively and silently breathe a sigh of relief. Once we saw the giant red lobster on the water tower as we crossed the river, my dad would instinctively crack the windows, letting in the fresh, briny air. He knows there are just a few hours left until we get to his favorite place, until he won't be thinking about work or fucking assholes. He turns up the music.

A couple years ago now, right after Thanksgiving, Richard and I called off our engagement. It was not a decision that I wanted to make, and I was devastated. Seeing me at my lowest, my family was also deeply affected and concerned. Richard was a big brother to Sarah, and like a son to my mom and dad. Dad was livid. He was hurt too. The few weeks until Christmas were hard, but we tried to celebrate our favorite holiday as we always did. I got wasted at our family friends' party on Christmas Eve, not a tradition, and put on a half-hearted smile the next morning. I tried to focus on the fact that I would finally be moving out of my parents' house, something my sister and I had decided we'd do together after my relationship fell apart.

Our plan was to head to Maine the next morning, where we'd spend a few days together as a family before New Year's. We hadn't been there during the winter for a few years, and felt some sort of obligation to go. But around three in the morning Christmas night, my sister threw open my bedroom door and said that mom was calling an ambulance for dad. Before I could find out why, I was running upstairs. My dad was throwing up, and had unbearable dizziness. We were worried it was his heart, despite his good health. When the paramedics arrived, they asked my dad questions as he lay in bed, unable to move much on his own. I sat at the desk in the back of the room trying to stay calm but he looked so weak and helpless. I was terrified.

Later that morning my parents came back from the hospital. My dad was ok, but all signs pointed to a severe case of vertigo. Typically caused by some sort of inner ear problem, vertigo symptoms can include a host of debilitating sensations, from a feeling of constant spinning, to headaches and hearing loss. For the next 24 hours, my dad lay immobile on the couch, unable to eat much or watch TV or do anything really because it made him dizzy. All he could do was throw up into the blue plastic bucket beside him. Smells of other people eating made him throw up more. We did not go to Maine. Dad wouldn't have been able to handle the ride, let alone the drive.

Dad tried to do work from home over the next few days but could only get a little bit done before feeling ill, and becoming frustrated. He wanted to help Sarah and me put together furniture for our new apartment, but it took him hours to do something that normally would take him 30 minutes. He snapped at my mom. He started to worry his condition would not go away. The internet told us that vertigo usually just goes away on

it its own after a few minutes or hours, but other people he heard about who had vertigo were still dealing with it after years—missing work, never quite feeling themselves--it's not uncommon for people to experience reoccurring bouts. We worried as well.

Luckily, Sarah worked as an athletic trainer in a Physical Therapy clinic. She happened to recall that one of the therapists at the clinic was one of the few people in the country who knew how to do treatments for vertigo. Seeing our dad in a state we hadn't before, Sarah felt a sense of urgency to help him get back to normal. She appealed to her colleague to clear several spots in her schedule to work with Dad on his balance and eye movement. She gave him "brain training" exercises that Sarah says are very similar to the ones that concussion patients undergo. After several sessions and after about a week of being mostly horizontal on the couch though, his symptoms slowly started to lessen. We held our breaths, but soon enough, he was back to normal. Except he wasn't exactly the same.

The doctors told Dad that his vertigo was almost certainly brought on by stress. He needed to relax more, and not let work get to him. Miraculously, my dad took their advice. He realized he took on the things that upset him so much so that it physically debilitated him. He never wanted to again feel as helpless as he had when he didn't know if he would be able to work, drive, or read again without the world spinning.

Although it was still hard for him, Dad gave me my space in dealing with my breakup the way I wanted to, rather than insisting that Richard come explain himself to him right away. He let me grieve in peace. And although Sarah and I now had our own place, only about fifteen minutes away in the next town over, my mom reported that my

dad was always in a much better mood now—he took a step back from things at work and stopped taking on extra responsibility. He wasn't breaking down when traffic popped up. When we saw him he was usually upbeat and chatty. It was wonderful to see.

It's been almost two years since Dad's vertigo and there have been tense times on the road with him here and there—especially when things get hectic at work for him. But this year, instead of imploding when things got out of hand, he took a sabbatical to figure out what he really wanted to do with his career and with his life. He still gets bent out of shape sometimes, but usually it's because something else is bothering him—he's concerned about someone, or worried about taking a lesser paying job because he wants to take care of us. I feel a tinge of guilt to write it, but vertigo was probably a good thing to happen to my dad, a wake up call.

Even though I'm an adult now, and have been for some time, I'll be joining my family on many more car trips. Getting to our destination is much easier these days, especially when I can help drive. Usually we are all just happy to be heading somewhere together. But the other nice thing about being an adult is that if I start hearing the f word, I can crack open a beer in the backseat.

Eight-hour car trips to Gramma's house in Ohio were always exciting to me as a kid. I was never daunted by the idea of boredom, or not being able to run around outside. At Christmastime on the last day of school before the break, I would joyously recite lyrics about Frosty and Rudolph during the holiday sing-along, with images of cookies and presents running through my mind, looking at the clock every few minutes

knowing that my parents would soon pick me up and we'd make our trek to Mansfield. They'd load Sarah and me into our red Dodge Caravan, the boxy looking ones they had before the days of automatic locks and sliding doors, and the two of us would stretch out on the van's floor where my parents had removed the middle bench seat for us. Before the memories of Cancer and fucks, and breakups, there were these memories, of just us four in the car together.

Sarah and I would fight over who got to lie on the Pocahontas sleeping bag, and who got Beauty and the Beast, but once that was settled, I'd spread it out and lie across the van floor. As it grew darker we'd pop a movie into our portable VHS TV, carefully resting on the middle console between my parents. I'd feel the vibrations of the tires against the road on my back, strangely soothing, and in the glow of the TV, with my arm around a favorite stuffed animal, I would drift off to sleep until we stopped for fast food or made it to our destination.

*

VANTAGE POINTS

After a long layover, an eight-hour flight across the Atlantic, and a 20-minute bus ride, we had finally reached Edinburgh. Staring out of the picture windows of a double-decker airport bus, I felt my uncertainty slipping away, replaced by eager anticipation. Lonely countryside gave way to streets packed with quaint houses and pleasant looking mom and pop shops. I hadn't been sure what to expect in the U.K.—I had signed up for “Cool Britannia,” a study abroad program that would fulfill six English credits. Previous Cool Britannia participants that had visited us in our study abroad prep course at Virginia Tech had mostly given us tips about how much money to bring with us and what to pack for the upcoming trip to Scotland, and then London, but I still didn't know what it would all feel like.

The month-long summer program had a full itinerary of plays, museum visits, and historic landmark tours planned, but also plenty of time for our own exploration. Aside from attending the planned events and meeting twice a week for discussion, the only other requirement was that, before returning to school in the fall, we complete a creative project or paper that illustrated how being immersed in Shakespeare, British theater, and the birthplace of so much classic literature had expanded our understanding of the subject of English and writing. Our group was loosely led by three Virginia Tech professors—Jane, a theater professor, and Tim and Kaye, who were married and taught English. The

rest of us were Hokie students—16 gals and four guys. Like me, most of the group would be entering their senior year come fall, but a few others were juniors and even fewer sophomores. I had just turned 21. Prior to taking off on our excursion, our group had fulfilled a 1-credit prep course in the spring, meeting briefly three different times over the semester to get a feel for what lay ahead and what novels and plays we needed to be familiar with. Aside from Trevor, a friend I had met in my creative writing classes, I didn't know any of the other students. Although I was nervous, and would be travelling without my family, boyfriend, and friends, I was more overwhelmed with a sense of independence and excitement.

Once my fellow study abroad companions and I had reached the heart of the city, we were dropped off at the base of a steep road, left to trek with our heavy luggage to the hostel we'd be staying at for a week. We were mostly English and Theater students, with a few other majors sprinkled in. The rows of apartment buildings and small shops we'd seen on the way in were gone. Instead, we were now winding through streets of cobblestone, surrounded on either side by gothic buildings made of brown and gray blocks. Clock towers, spires, and greened copper domes filled the skyline. Gargoyles leered at me from antiquated churches. There were marble statues and stained glass, chimneys and narrow alleyways shrouded in darkness, despite the sunshine. But the gloomy buildings and shadow were beautiful. I began to imagine how Edinburgh may have influenced one of its natives, Robert Louis Stevenson, as it seemed a perfect backdrop to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Amongst the blocks of buildings and stone, lush green patches of grass carpeted small parks. Bright flowers and signs for botanical gardens, museums, and the zoo lined the sidewalks. The Union Jack hung from storefronts that advertised cell phone plans, designer goods, and fast food. I had never seen anything like this city. Some of the buildings looked like ones I had seen back in Georgetown—a part of D.C. that I had frequented over the years growing up in northern Virginia. But this city was much older—I felt as if the buildings and sidewalks were pulsing with a hidden history not yet revealed to me, something alive and flowing just beneath their surfaces. I was in what seemed like an ancient place, yet I was still surrounded by the bright lights and the buzz of the modern world. The streets were filled with eclectic people, on their way to work or the pub or to the many gift shops—all of it beckoning us Americans to join them.

I arrived with the others at our hostel, only to learn that we would have to wait several hours, laden with luggage, before we could check in to our rooms. Luckily, the hostel had a large lounge area. There we gathered, to further get to know each other, to sleep in the plush red chairs, and plan the first of many extracurricular excursions.

After the first hour or so of waiting, a slender girl entered the lounge, which had been mainly empty of other hostel guests.

“Are you with the Virginia Tech group?” the girl asked. She looked to be in her early twenties and had black hair, and skin the color of molasses. I assumed she was a hostel employee, about to tell us our rooms were ready, although she had an American accent.

“Yes we are,” a few of us told her, eager to finally take all of our belongings and unpack.

“Oh, okay,” she said nonchalantly, sitting down on the periphery of our group, not saying anything else or explaining further why she had asked.

“Is she in our group?” a few of us whispered to each other.

“I don’t know, she wasn’t at any of the meetings...”

“Well why is she just sitting there?”

But just then Tom, one of the few male students on the trip, came back from the bathroom and saw the girl sitting near us.

“There you are!” Tom shouted, and placed an arm around her shoulder. “I was wondering when you were going to get here!”

He ushered her over to the three professors who had joined us--Kaye, Peter, and Jane--and they all greeted her with recognition. I don’t remember ever getting a formal introduction, but we eventually found out that the new girl was Carissa, and that we had not previously met her because she had graduated the semester before. The school had made special arrangements so that she could come on the trip as a grad student. She had arrived in Edinburgh a few nights earlier, and was now joining the group. Carissa’s arrival had been odd, but we were ready to let her into the circle of friendship that was already forming among all of us. Our rooms were finally ready, and we headed upstairs. The boys had their own room, and the professors another. The girls were split into two rooms. The new girl Carissa was one of the six girls who would share mine.

After a late lunch of too-greasy fish and chips, walking over bridges and rail stations to purchase temporary cell phones, and exploration of the surrounding streets that were plastered with flyers for literary pub crawls and ghost tours, it was time to celebrate our first night together, and our new-found freedom in a foreign city.

Our last stop of that cider-soaked night was a bar called Whistle-Binkies—its white lettering above the door only evident to me during subsequent days when I passed by it. The place seemed to be far more popular among the locals. A live band was playing at one end of the small building, and half of us squeezed into the nearest tables while the rest of us stood. The cute Scottish boys in the band were a few feet away. I danced in-place, feeling at home among my new friends, feeling carefree.

“I am ha7ingg the timme of may life!” I typed in my dinky new flip phone, an international text to my sister back home.

Eventually our group managed to score a long table, just big enough for all of us, at the other end of the pub. The table took up a narrow, sunken-level room. Sitting inside, we felt like we were in our own Virginia Tech VIP cave. The arrangement was perfect for everyone to talk. I made multiple trips out of our VIP room to the bar, and I saw the new girl Carissa each time there, talking with Tom--but most of her attention was on a conversation she was having with another man at the bar. The rest of the group mostly remained together back in the room, but Carissa had kept conversing with this other fellow who seemed to be a local--he had a few friends nearby. I don't remember paying much attention to them, except to say hi to Carissa.

“Hey!” I said overzealously. “We are over there in that room! C'mon!”

“No thanks,” she said pleasantly enough. “I’m talking with my friends. But thank you.”

I do not remember if Carissa had met the man that night, or on a previous one before the rest of us arrived. The only things I could recall about him were that he had dark hair, pasty skin, was tall, and was wearing a royal blue shirt.

Those are the details that I repeated several times to the police officers the next day when they interviewed me. I could not tell them the name of the pub then, or what color eyes the man had, or how many people he had been with at the bar. I simply didn’t know. I was one of the last of our group to be interviewed. Each person gave them the same information more or less--we didn’t know more. The police officers wouldn’t tell us what had happened to Carissa, although soon enough, as we all discussed the events that had transpired, we would find out more. The police also asked me what I had had to drink. I told them about the Strongbow cider I had discovered, among other things.

“Oh, Strongbow!” the male officer had said. “Have you tried Bauman’s?”

That morning, after Whistle-Binkies, we had all awoken early, in time to have breakfast in the lounge, where we would all congregate and make our way to first the Writer’s museum and then the Children’s museum as part of our scheduled curriculum. Staying in my room at the hostel were six other girls, including Carissa. But when we awoke, Carissa’s bed was empty. I didn’t give her absence more thought. I

assumed she had been getting ready in the bathroom. But as it was nearing time to meet downstairs, she still did not appear.

“Where is she?” A few of the girls wondered. Thinking aloud, I mused that she must have had a good night, and had hit it off with her newfound friend. Carissa had seemed quiet, or maybe standoffish, but I found myself feeling impressed with her decision to make the most of the night, and do her own thing. We went to breakfast without her, assuming she would join us there. Stuffing fruit, hash-browns, and yogurt into our mouths and purses, we hurried through our morning meal. We were scheduled to leave the hostel in five minutes. There was no sign of Carissa.

“Mia, I think you should call Carissa, to give her a chance to show up before the professors see she isn’t here,” one of the girls murmured. For some reason, I was the only one to have gotten Carissa’s phone number after we purchased the cell phones.

I punched the dial key. After several rings, the automated voicemail message started. I hung up. I told my roommates. Looking at each other nervously, we silently decided to tell the professors. But then my phone rang. Carissa was calling back.

“Hello?” I said, greatly relieved.

“Hi, who is this?” Carissa asked, her voice a little groggy.

“Mia!” I said, in a bubbly voice. “We were just wonderi-”

“Can I talk to one of the professors please?” she said, sternly this time.

“Sure,” I said, feeling deflated. I knew something was up.

I handed the phone to Jane, the theater professor, who no one but the theater students really liked. Jane seemed to favor them, and viewed the rest of us hooligans, often frowning at us through her gold-rimmed glasses.

“It’s Carissa,” I said. Jane gave me a puzzled look and I informed her that she hadn’t been in the hostel that morning.

“Oh...” she said. Then she took the phone to a corner of the courtyard we were gathered in, while the others chatted. Only a few of us knew that Carissa wasn’t there. I pretended not to be concerned with the conversation, but I kept my eye on Jane in the corner, with one hand covering her free ear, and the other squishing the phone to her head. When she hung up she brought the phone back to me.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, oh.”

A week later, we left for London.

One day, about three weeks into our month-long excursion, we took a ferryboat to Greenwich. My long sleeve tee and athletic shorts did not keep me warm as we rode on the top deck of the boat, half listening to a tour guide as we wound our way along the Thames. The sky was clear but gray, the water below brown and murky. I made my way to different sections of the boat, talking with different clusters of our group. Some people felt seasick. I had been chatting with my friend Paige and some others below deck for a while, but then decided get some fresh air on the top deck, where I noticed another friend, Yiseol, and Carissa were sitting amongst the rows of white benches. After the incident back in Scotland, Carissa had not left us to return home. The two girls shared a flat

together where we were staying in the Angel neighborhood in London, along with a girl named Rosalie. Carissa had a sullen look upon her face, and stared somewhere out in space, beyond the megaphone-wielding boat guide. I had become good friends with Yiseol. As I chatted with her, I also tried to direct the conversation at Carissa, so that she would feel included. Yiseol, however, was the only one to respond. I was relieved when the guide pointed out Greenwich in the distance.

In Greenwich we again broke off into pairs and small clusters, only to regroup in various forms throughout the day. This was the beauty of our party of students--it was obvious who was attached to whom, but everyone always came back together haphazardly; free to roam in solitude or in a large pack. We were happy to be together as a group, yet there were no harsh feelings when someone broke away. Moving through the town in this manner, we explored the indoor market, gorging ourselves on various ethnic food. To work off the bulges in our stomachs we climbed a long path up a steep hill to the Royal Observatory, where the Prime Meridian was demarcated outside. We each took a turn getting our pictures taken while we straddled the line, one foot in the western hemisphere, the other in the east.

Once we were back at the boat station in our section of London, we all decided to go to Abbey Road. We already had our photos from one tourist trap that day, and now we needed to visit the zigzagging crosswalk that the Beatles had made famous. After shoving onto a train in the tube, I sat down as a few others squabbled over which route to take. It wasn't supposed to be a long ride. The car we were on was fairly empty; it was the middle of the afternoon. Carissa stood at the edge of the group. Not even Yiseol or

Rosalie were conversing with her. I covertly watched her. None of us really disliked her, we all tried at one point or another to make conversation, but it was clear she no longer wanted any part of that. Yet some days she would act normally and jump in with a small group of us, excited about whatever activity was planned for that day.

Right now, she looked absolutely miserable as she leaned against the side doors of the car. She had dark circles under her eyes and her skin had a waxy appearance. I watched as she put her hand to her stomach, grimacing a little. The train car lurched and then Carissa's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes bulged and I saw something start to gush out from between the fingers of her cupped hand. She tried to hold it in, but there was nothing she could do to stop the mint chocolate chip ice cream she had eaten so happily in Greenwich from coming out. The puke was the same color as my favorite Essie nail polish--Candy Apple Mint. It pooled in a thick, putrid puddle at her feet.

Panicked, I dug in my purse. I found a few crumpled napkins and gave them to Carissa. She was able to wipe away most of it from her mouth, but when the napkins had been exhausted she still had bits of green slime on her face and shirt. I looked around. To my relief, hardly anyone in our group had noticed. They were still busily chatting, and were a little further down the train car. Those who had noticed had alarmed faces, but figured one person was adequate help. I felt immensely sad for Carissa, yet I was fighting back my own urge to vomit.

“Are you okay?” I asked emphatically.

“Yeah, I'll be okay,” she said sullenly, but she still had the waxy look. I could tell she wasn't done throwing up. “I'm gonna get off at the next stop.”

I was torn. I felt as though it was my duty to go with Carissa, help her clean up in the station's bathroom and accompany her back to the flat. Yet, going with Carissa, a girl who I found it hard to make conversation with, meant skipping out on Abbey Road, and splitting from the rest of the group. What would I miss? It was *Abbey Road*. The *Beatles* had walked on the very same pavement, recorded in the building right there. I knew what the right thing was, but I really didn't want to do the right thing.

"Do you want me to come with you?" I asked tepidly.

"No, it's alright."

"Are you sure, do you know how to get back?"

"Yeah I'll be fine".

At the next stop, I watched as Carissa stepped off and walked toward the bathroom. She had her hand to her mouth again.

Although the three weeks we spent in London were amazing, I was most fascinated by our first week in Scotland. My favorite part of Edinburgh was in the center of the city. About a mile from Edinburgh castle, down the Royal Mile and just beyond Holyrood Palace and the House of Parliament, stands Arthur's Seat. The main peak of a group of large, rolling mounds of earth and rock, Robert Louis Stevenson described it as "a hill for magnitude, a mountain in virtue of its bold design."

To me, it was indeed a mountain. Just over 800 feet high however, it is a climb that almost anyone can do, from virtually any side of it. The side of Arthur's seat closest to Parliament is rather gentle and sloping, and therefore that is the route we took, five or

six of us girls, when we decided to take on the giant hill. Arthur's seat was pretty much visible from any part of the city, as it is surrounded on all sides by the tightly wound streets and rows of buildings. The wall of the Parliament building that faced Arthur's Seat was even made almost entirely of glass, to take in the impressive view during deliberations. Whenever I saw Arthur's seat in the distance, I felt as though it was protecting Edinburgh, standing guard high over the city. The buildings seemed to go right up to the base, and then seamlessly give way to rocks covered by a blanket of green. It was May when we arrived in Scotland, and the meadow grasses that covered the earth were dotted with fields of brilliant gold flowers. That first week of our UK trip, it drew us toward it, down through the cobbled streets, and out into open air.

At the base of the path we chose, there was a large pond. Enormous swans glided on the water's surface, and as we ascended, they turned into white dots in a blue-black puddle. Along the path to the top, remnants of old stone wells and chapels paused our progress, since we needed to commemorate each with a picture. On all sides of us, hills created peaks and valleys. I was in a wonderland. I walked ahead so that I could savor it in solitude.

Jenna and Felicia, a member of Virginia Tech's Corps of Cadets, were almost to the top already, but the rest of us had begun panting and sweating, despite chilling winds that blew harder the higher we went. The path became rockier, but I loved the challenge. I was reminded of the hikes I took with my family as a kid, jumping from rock to rock on the Billy Goat trail along the Potomac River. The closer we got to the peak, the faster I wanted to reach it, but I couldn't help stopping every few moments to turn around and

take in the ever-expanding view. Edinburgh Castle, which had given a generous view of the city when one was atop of it, was a mere toy down below, and the hills topped with blackened cathedral ruins and gravestones were just goose-bumps on the skin of the city's surface. Beyond everything was the ocean, blue and yawning.

Finally, we clambered over some boulders and determined we had made it; there was nowhere else to climb. A squat, white monument almost like a pedestal stood in front of us, tattooed with the names of lovers and tourists and thrill-seeking kids who had reached the pinnacle in days, months, years before us. Was this Arthur's seat? And who was Arthur I wondered--King Arthur? That's what most say, although there are various answers. For now it was my seat, and for now the world felt like it was mine.

After spending a fleeting twenty minutes on top of Arthur's Seat, we began to walk back down the massive hill. The sun was starting its own descent, and the sky was turning gray. Everyone was much less chatty than they had been on the way up. Maybe the other girls had felt the same way I did up there--felt as though this was a sacred sort of place, a place that could change your life. I also wondered if they had remembered what I had remembered as I sat on one of the giant rocks, surveying everything below. A few moments ago, I had been looking for smaller landmarks that I could distinguish from so high up. The castle and the ruins were easy to spot, but could I find St. Giles Cathedral, which we had visited on our first day? I could just make out the rooftop level of the National Museum of Scotland, and the distinguishing features of the Scottish Parliament building. Where was our hostel, the Thai restaurant we had gone to, the various pubs we visited? And where was Whistle Binkies. Where was Carissa.

Carissa was not one of the girls who had conquered Arthur's seat with me that day—only a few nights had passed since she had been assaulted.

The morning after Whistle Binkies, on that first full day in the UK, Carissa had awoken in an alley. I imagine her slowly opening her eyes in beams of slanted sun, looking down at her clothes, dirty, and her buttons askew, her hair matted and her body stiff. The details of what happened were never told to us, neither by Carissa, the police, or the professors.

Later that morning Peter, one of the other professors, only told us that Carissa had called from the police station, and that something had happened, and for it to have happened on the first night, "...was very bad."

The next day, Carissa appeared again, and joined us in our first classroom session that we would hold twice that week in a school building down the Royal Mile. It was alluded to once more that—something—had transpired, but we were only told this so that we could be aware in terms of thinking about safety. A girl named Megan shot up her hand:

"I realize what has happened might be personal, but I think we have a right to know details. I personally don't feel safe and my parents are probably going to freak out."

Carissa, who had been fairly silent and stony looking, shot back: "It's my right to keep this to myself. It's private and nothing about it affects you so no one needs to know."

Unrest in our group was evident, but no one pushed much more for info, yet. But that didn't mean we stopped looking. Megan, and several others I am sure, easily found some

scant details of what had happened to Carissa in online newspaper articles. But until writing this, I had not looked these materials up myself. I didn't really need to. Rumors among us and the spread of information made it evident that Carissa had been drugged by the man at the bar, and then raped. The article said, "sexually assaulted." At that time, I was 21 years old, but I was vastly naïve, and had led a sheltered life. I always felt safe growing up. I could not recall ever feeling threatened by someone. I didn't really know anyone who had been "sexually assaulted." In fact, I stupidly hadn't even known that those terms were a euphemism for rape—I just thought it meant bad things were done to her, bad things that hadn't gone as far as that, but were still traumatic.

The young man had apparently done this to other women, and mention of the "Royal Mile Rapist" floated from the headlines to our lips.

The article with the most information, which was more difficult to find than I first thought it would be when I searched for it several years after our time in the U.K., describes the attack on the then 22-year-old Carissa, although I'm almost certain she was 23, happening less than 48-hours after she arrived in Edinburgh. Multiple articles place our group at the Opium nightclub, a place none of us went, except maybe perhaps Carissa, after we departed from her.

I have just a few clear memories from when we left Whistle Binkies that night: we exited in an almost conga-line formation, weaving our way through the crowded pub, bumping into locals who claimed we were not American because we didn't have "blonde hair" or say "howdy ya'll." As we snaked by the bar, I saw Carissa and told her to c'mon, told her we were leaving. She said she would stay, that she didn't want to go. Tom

offered to stay with her--we were in a foreign country after all. But Carissa said she was fine. We were only blocks away from the hostel. Reluctantly, Tom took up the rear of our conga line and we filed out into the night.

The information I find online also says that Carissa left with her attacker around 3:30 a.m. and was attacked between 4:00 and 4:30. The police reported that the “serious” sexual assault left Carissa, who was never named in the paper, feeling “extremely distressed, upset, and traumatized.”

The attacker was described as six feet tall. Carissa was described as having a “slender build” and being 5’2”. Carissa wasn’t weak. She had been in the Corp of Cadets too, like Felicia, who had powered her way to the top of Arthur’s Seat with ease. She was into physical fitness and eating well—she was an active person. She didn’t indulge in excessively girly things, like one of our other travel-mates Melissa, who was obsessed with all things Disney. She didn’t fit the profile of the “victim”—at least the one the media seemed to want to portray. No matter how she, or any other woman before her, was portrayed however, she had in fact become a victim. The man who made a victim out of her was a coward—a coward who used drugs to render a strong, smart, innocent woman defenseless. It could have happened to any of us—yet we acted as though we were spared because we had done the right thing, and Carissa hadn’t. I think some of the girls partially blamed what happened on Carissa, for not leaving with us that night—for being an independent woman who did what she wanted. No matter where she turned, she was being punished for what someone else did to her.

The police were listed as trying to recover any clue that might have been caught on CCTV, and had quarantined the area where the attack supposedly took place, to look for forensic evidence.

A few nights after the incident, in our bunk beds at the hostel in Edinburgh, I was talking with another girl, when we erupted in laughter over something I can no longer recall.

“I am *trying* to sleep,” Carissa’s voice hissed at us from across the room on her top bunk. The other girl and I looked at each other, and suppressed more laughter. *How could we laugh*, I think now. Carissa’s decision to stay in Scotland and then continue on to London with us somehow didn’t faze us. Although we only had murky details, how did we not understand that she had been through a traumatic assault, or register how extremely strong and brave she was to continue on—absent any close friends or family, in a foreign country? I try to imagine myself in her position, at that age, and I know I would not have been able to carry on, at all, let alone as stoically as she did. Perhaps by doing what none of us could have imagined ourselves, Carissa made us believe she was okay, and we happily accepted that façade.

Carissa was robbed of the experience that the rest of us had—the month of partying, bonding, absorbing the literary history and rich culture around us in hopes of shaping our future careers and enriching our knowledge of the world. We were shaped by the Shakespeare, the plays, the walking amongst graves of classic writers in Westminster Abbey, the drinking of wine openly in the park as we listened to the shouts echoing from

Speaker's Corner. No doubt Carissa's future was shaped by the trip too, by what happened to her. What I worry about is that our collective reaction to what happened to her will always hover over her as well.

Perhaps it was subconscious, or perhaps I'd just like to think it was, but we didn't want to let what happened to Carissa ruin our fun. Instead of understanding why she was hostile, aloof, or alone for most of the trip, we gossiped, rolled our eyes, moved on.

Everyone felt bad, sure, but who did anything? Some of us talked with her, we made an effort, but always breathed a sigh of relief if she just hung out with the professors, or went off to check off the few things on her own agenda.

One night after drinking, Carissa would break down in front of Paige and Yiseol and tell them that she could never tell her family what happened—that they were a military family and things like this didn't happen to them. That it would be unacceptable. Looking back, this admission helps make it at least partially clearer as to why Carissa stayed on the study abroad trip. But more likely, leaving would have meant explaining to her parents why she was returning home so quickly—and the why would have been unbearable to speak. There would be too much shame. When Paige recounted to me Carissa's rare moment of raw emotion, I could tell that she had finally seen where Carissa was coming from—the look of sadness on her face and her sullen tone was just a fragment of what was going on in Carissa's world. While Carissa had bared her soul that night, although briefly, most of our group was still out getting hammered at a club, shrieking with drunken laughter through the halls of the flat when we returned. I suddenly hoped that Carissa had been fast asleep by that time, in a dream world far from

there. Other than that night, the only time Carissa mentioned the incident at all was to express her sheer exhaustion—the police interviews followed her to London after the first week in Scotland. After all, the man who had done this to her was suspected of doing it to others—there was now increased interest in catching the Royal Mile rapist. Carissa wanted to put it all behind her.

After returning to the U.S., I didn't think much of Carissa. I didn't tell anyone what happened. I didn't see her during my subsequent senior year at Tech, since she had graduated. If I saw any trace of her on Facebook I felt sad, but that's all.

I remember Edinburgh as a mysterious but charming, even magical place—where cashiers said “cheers” when they were finished ringing you up for your Pasties, where people snacked and drank among ruins and graves, and quirky Scottish tour guides told you about the real Braveheart as you toured the wet, green highlands. But I wonder, what does Carissa remember it as? In time, I hope that she may forgive the city I came to love, and forgive us, forgive me.

*

LONELY LUNCHESES

It's Friday and it's happy hour, and that means time for a beer. I have a dinner date planned with Hannah, one of my best friends I've known since high school, but I'm early, and my dining companion is still about 20 minutes away. I sidle up to the end of the sleek, gray and black granite bar next to an elderly couple--the only empty space I can see. The older woman, well dressed in a tweed blazer and pearl necklace, glances over at me and then continues conversing with her husband. I help myself to a drink menu and peruse the Friday evening deals.

Although walking into a restaurant alone and ordering a drink while waiting for someone is a simple act, a normal thing to do, but doing so is an act of pride in my case. Years ago, I would have been petrified to venture past the waiting area or hostess stand alone, let alone linger at a bar by myself. It's not always easy still, but waiting, drinking, or eating alone, even if just for a short amount of time, has become more normalized, and sometimes even enjoyable to me, as I've learned to embrace solitude in social situations and to project confidence, even when there's no trace of it on the inside.

The drink menu at the bar lists several Oktoberfest options now that it's late September. Settling on a German beer that I can't pronounce, I order, and take my beer to a narrow counter where a row of stools sit mostly empty. Now that I'm a little more settled I look around a bit—Hannah has picked the location, a mid-grade restaurant called

Lyon Hall. It's still early—many people are still getting off of work—but being located in the popular Arlington, Virginia neighborhood of Clarendon, the place is already abuzz with young professionals and fellow Millennials, a few families, and other assorted people. The small group of people a few stools away from me is made up of a young woman and a few attractive men my age in white collared shirts, now unbuttoned at the neck, and business slacks. The guys speak loudly enough for me to pick up parts of their conversation, laughing often. Looking at them, I'm reminded of certain cliques of popular boys from my high school or college—the type often referred to as “bros,” the type whose presence once made me feel nervous or insecure. I judge them for only a moment before telling myself to not make assumptions about their personalities. Instead, I set my oversize workbag on the stool next to me and remove a few articles that I'm reading for a Folklore class I'm taking as part of my grad school curriculum. I casually sip my beer—it's disappointing but still eases my muscles as it soaks through my blood. I refrain from making sideways glances at people around me as I periodically make a note or underline a portion of text, until Hannah arrives, and we are seated for more drinks and dinner.

A 2015 study by Open Table reveals that, in the two-year period leading up to study's publication, reservations for tables of one had increased by 62%. Although I have never made a reservation to dine alone, the findings make sense to me, as food tourism foodie Instagram accounts, as well as the “Treat yo-self” mindset, have become increasingly popular. But a more meaningful reason behind the increase may be that people are embracing being alone, and realizing it isn't necessarily lonely.

On the days that I had English during my senior year of high school, lunchtime came in the middle of class. 12:15 would hit and the class would head straight to the cafeteria or to their lockers to grab lunch bags, or maybe to meet up with friends who were also headed to lunch from other classes. We'd all eat and then return to the same class until the next bell rang.

At Chantilly High, the cafeteria was unofficially divided into four sections, one for each grade level. Seniors were at the far end. There were also four different periods of lunch, so you often weren't able to eat with all of your friends. Our English class was only one of two senior classes that shared the same lunch period on those days, so all of the seniors fit at two long tables that spanned the width of the room. One table was made up of mostly girls, some more popular than others. At one end of the other table, it was a majority of male students, with the same social hierarchy makeup. On the other end of that table, I would sit with three other girls that were from the senior government class that shared the same lunch slot. The four of us weren't what you would call outcasts, I don't think, but we certainly weren't very popular and we all were somewhat bookish and quirky, and simply didn't have a lot of friends amongst the two tables. The other girls weren't even close friends of mine, but we at least got along and had each other's company.

Our little group sat on the outskirts of the rest of our peers, and we ate our Lunchables and homemade sandwiches and chatted comfortably, in peace. But every few weeks, whenever the government class had a quiz or test, in order to not interrupt the

assessment, the teacher would send the class to a later lunch session. This left me alone, on the edge of the table.

The worst part was that I never knew when it was going to happen. I'd arrive at the table as usual and start unpacking the contents of my brown paper lunch bag, looking down towards the cafeteria doors for signs of the other seniors. But the minutes would tick by. By the time all of the students in our English class had retrieved or purchased their lunches and sat down, I'd know that my friends weren't coming that day. The few seats of empty space between the rest of the class and me made me feel exposed. All throughout those lunches, I could feel my cheeks hot with embarrassment. I imagined 30 sets of eyes, searing into my hair, my body, my clothes. No one ever bothered me, but in my mind I was certain that people were scoffing at me, whispering. To make matters worse, the person I had the most intense crush on was also in my class, down at the other end of the table with the rest of them.

My best friend Karina had the lunch period that came directly before mine. If we were released for lunch early enough, I'd sometimes see her as she left the cafeteria and savor a few moments talking with her. I soon learned to bring to lunch the notebook that the two of us would exchange notes in, or a book to read. Doing something at least made me feel somewhat protected, like it created a translucent bubble that partially obscured my presence from others. I could have asked someone at the girls' table if I could sit with them. One of them was even on my soccer team. But I was too shy, and too hurt that no one asked me. On one occasion, I became so anxious that I snuck off to the bathroom to eat alone in the safety of a black stall, distracting myself by reading the graffiti--a

plethora of juvenile poems, anonymous threats or insults, and words of inspiration. I felt sorry for myself, as though my solitude was a result of someone else's actions, someone's cruelty. But I alone stopped myself from seeking company, because I was too scared of what might happen. Luckily, the solo lunches didn't happen often.

I often wonder how different my high school experience might have been if I had not been so shy. I had a few very close friends, as well as a circle of other friends from classes, sports teams I played on, and Girl Scouts. I felt completely at ease when I was with any or all of them, but whenever I walked the halls alone, or didn't share any classes with them, I withdrew. Being "alone" made me feel vulnerable.

After graduating high school, I chose to attend Virginia Tech. None of my close friends would be joining me, however about forty other students from Chantilly would be. I was nervous but excited. I thought of college as a place where I could start with a clean social slate—I didn't have to be tied to the image of the awkward, quiet girl that I assumed others associated me with. Carrie, the random roommate that I was paired with, couldn't have been more different than myself—she was outspoken, religious, and preppy. Yet, despite what made us different, we formed a fast bond. She was closer with some of the people from her high school that had also come to Tech than I was with my former classmates, but she too found herself away from her best friends. I stuck to Carrie like glue and made friends with the people she knew. Together, we formed relationships with the other girls on our hall, participated in any campus activity we could, ate meals together, and attempted to study.

My freshman year of college was extremely transformative for me because I was able to make new friends, and function as a young adult away from my family, even though I was still very dependent on them. I became less shy and enjoyed trying new things and meeting new people. I even played intramural soccer despite not previously knowing anyone on the team. However, one thing remained the same.

Carrie and the other friends I had made rarely shared classes with me, and although sometimes our schedules allowed us to meet up for lunches and dinners, there were times when I had no one to eat meals with. It was different than being forced to sit in the cafeteria with my English class, but the thought of sitting down in one of the busy dining halls by myself petrified me. There were many more, smaller groups of people gathered together than the high school cafeteria, but even with people more scattered about, I felt conspicuous to be sitting alone. I didn't want to be the same, lonely girl that I had been back in high school. So, if my friends were busy and couldn't meet up for dinner, I'd opt to pick up food to take back to my dorm room, safe from glances and uncomfortable memories.

About a year after earning my bachelor's degree, and several months working as a floater in a high school English department, I got an internship working in the communications department at a labor union in D.C. I was thrilled at the opportunity, and thankful that I would no longer have to try to brush up on my high school grammar lessons, or unsuccessfully monitor the kids at in-school suspension. I still lived at home with my family in Fairfax, Virginia, so I would have to take the metro to work. I wasn't a

stranger to D.C.'s transit system, but I had never had to really navigate it by myself. The one time I had, I had ended up going the wrong direction for miles.

But I was determined to not let that happen again. The day before I started my internship, my mom went on dry run of my commute with me, or at least the beginning stages of it. We drove to the park-and ride where I would catch the bus, and then parked at the Vienna metro station and went inside to purchase my reloadable "SmartTrip" fare card. Aside from crowded trains, my commute that week went off without a hitch. Every now and then, almost five years later, I still miss a stop and have to double back, or head in the wrong direction if I'm going somewhere new, but I'm happy to say I'm a pro now, and I don't have to call my mom to come save me.

On my first day of my new job, Leilah, one of the women in my department kindly showed me the dimly lit employee lounge, where people ate their lunches—sometimes only a few at a time and other times closer to ten people. There were microwaves and a fridge, several round tables, and booth seats lining two walls. Leilah sat and ate with me, and introduced me to another colleague she was friends with named Ray. They eventually began talking about a wedding that Ray had attended that weekend with his girlfriend. Seeing how in love the bride and groom were, said Ray, made him realize he was never going to have that with his own partner. He continued to muse over how he was going to break up with her.

I felt extremely grateful to Leilah for showing me the ropes. But at our small table of three, I felt pretty uncomfortable. I needlessly worried that my new coworkers might think the food I was eating was odd. I wanted to text my boyfriend about how everything

was going, but didn't want to be rude in front of the others. The small talk and my first day nerves made me yearn for a chance to collect my thoughts alone.

Alone? Here? I was surprised at the sensation. Although I had never had trouble being by myself in places of privacy, being alone in a semi-public place such as the lounge, where people were eating, was new. But other people in the room were sitting by themselves, peacefully shoveling fries or bites of salad while they read or watched something on their ipad. The next day, I came down the lounge and quietly, cautiously, chose a booth in the corner by myself. I snuck glances at the few people others scattered around the lounge—they were minding their own business. I pulled out the various leftovers I had packed in my lunch bag and cracked open a diet coke. The anxiety I had felt at the table with Leilah and Ray the previous day was dissipating. I read as I ate and soon forgot the others around me.

That summer I did also enjoy lunches with the company of other interns on many occasions, but long after they went back to school, and after I was hired on full-time, I continued to enjoy lunches alone in the lounge, doing homework or reading for pleasure.

I had taken another step out of my shell and could now eat alone amongst other people. I had also begun graduate school, which I would attend once or twice a week after work. On those nights, I'd grab a bite to eat on campus, finding a quiet place to eat and read before class. I also started flying by myself more often to go visit friends from college, or go see my boyfriend Richard when he was away at police academy training. I got used to flying alone, perhaps eating a hurried airport meal in my seat at the gate,

knowing that a few short hours later someone would be greeting me and picking me up, whisking me away somewhere. Over time however, as I moved further into my mid-twenties, I began to get assignments to travel for work. Usually, other coworkers would be on such assignments with me. We'd grab a taxi to our hotel together, meet up for lunches and dinner. Last May, I was assigned travel to Vancouver. There, I would be giving a communications presentation about messaging at a conference. Not knowing much about Vancouver, or even that it was in the Pacific Northwest, I began to get very excited about visiting, once I Googled it. Vancouver looked gorgeous, and it was.

Although everyone attending the conference was either a member or part of the staff of my union, I wasn't travelling with any close co-workers. I had met a few other attendees before, enough to say hi when I saw them and chat for a little. During my first afternoon after arriving, I worked with the other presenters in my group to prepare for the next day, but there was ample time afterwards to go explore. On the cab ride from the airport, and out the large picture windows of the top floors of the Hyatt we stayed at, I could see the stunning views of the bay, the snowcapped mountains beyond, and the cool architecture all around. The other women all had their own plans, but I decided I could not return to my hotel room.

I walked outside—the sun was no longer high in the sky and it was a perfect 60 degrees. I headed toward the water and observed the different people around me, some speaking French. A convention center lay at the bottom of the hill where the bay began, and after following a path along the pier, I settled on a restaurant, a sit down restaurant, for dinner. The hostess took me outside, to the very last table in the narrow enclosure that

overlooked the water. I ordered bangers and mash and enjoyed a local beer as I watched the people who went by, pushing strollers and jogging, or leisurely strolling as they looked up at seagulls. I had been checking Facebook and Email on my phone when my dad notified me that he received an AT&T alert that the data he had purchased for me (my phone was still under his plan) was 75% gone already, since I hadn't been connected to Wi-Fi. So I put my phone down and just let go. For brief moments, I worried that someone that I sort-of knew from work would walk by and question why I was alone, or I'd strain to hear what the group of people sitting behind me were saying, to make sure their conversation never steered towards the girl eating alone. As I scraped the last bite of creamy mashed potatoes from my plate, another hostess appeared and she seated a man at the table behind mine. He was dining solo too. I paid and walked back to the hotel, ready to call it a night after starting to feel the jet lag, but content.

The next evening, after working, I explored other districts. I photographed a giant Free-Willy sculpture, and the site of the Olympic Torch from the Vancouver Olympics. I took an empty, open air-trolley in search of more good food. I ate pork poutine and Brussels sprouts and drank rose and a strong negroni at a little window seat near the bar at a fancy restaurant. I read while I ate, and texted people back home. I felt slightly out of place but I occupied my mind, wondering what conversation the people on the other side of the glass were having.

On my final day in Vancouver, I gave my presentation. Public speaking is a whole other hurdle for me—something I struggle to do successfully. During my 45-minute segment, I spoke so quietly that someone had to stop me so they could get a mic, when

the other girls had not needed one. I gulped water between slides to try to quench an insatiable thirst that had come from nowhere. A boisterous but kind woman had to come whisper in my ear: “Just pretend you’re talking to your roommate or your boyfriend out there sweetie.”

My co-presenters were generous with their responses about my portion of the presentation, saying I had done a great job, but I knew it had been somewhat painful. I tried to grin through it, and we all high-fived and hugged, celebrating that we were done with the work.

I had a whole afternoon on that final day to kill, and I needed to get my mind off of how I had performed. I wanted to shake off the shaky, jittery feelings that had overtaken me at the podium.

Before embarking to Vancouver, I read that Stanley Park, a peninsula within walking distance of the Hyatt, was rated by Trip Adviser as “world’s most beautiful park”. Two older women I had befriended earlier at the conference had done the six-mile loop around the park by bike the previous day. They both raved about how beautiful it was. I had to go. I walked a mile to the bike shop where I rented a bike and helmet, and set out on the best bike ride I’ve experienced.

Every curve of the path, which bordered the bay the entire way, revealed something new. I would pass harbors filled with sailboats, giant trees with gnarled roots systems and knotted trunks. I paused to take many pictures, especially to capture the totem poles, a statue of a mermaid in the water, and the giant boulders that some brave

souls were attempting to climb out onto. Suspension bridges crossed the bay, stretching out to another part of the city I hoped to go visit another trip.

When I got to the furthest point of the peninsula, which faced out into more open water, the sun was beginning to set, and its light shot across the entire span of ocean water, blurring where the horizon started. I no longer felt uneasy, and my work presentation was behind me. I kept on, rounding back along the opposite side of the park, passing several beaches. The last beach had a sign that forbid smoking, drinking, and grilling—all of which people were doing. It was a small beach, crowded but not like those from back home, like Ocean City or Virginia Beach. Everyone seemed to be laughing, and relaxed. It was dark by the time I returned my bike. I wished that I had time to go around the park once more, but I told myself I'd come back some day. I had worked up an appetite and found a secluded Chinese restaurant. I ate in the heated out-door area that overlooked yet another quaint harbor, and sipped a mojito. The only other diners outside were a couple and a girl, eating alone, reading comic books.

That night, I met the two older ladies I had befriended earlier, in the hotel bar. We drank wine and shared a cheese plate. I had to get up early for my flight back home, but we got tipsy, talked about our bike rides, work, and love.

There are still certain places where I don't like being alone, in public. I wouldn't go sing karaoke by myself, and wouldn't go out to a bar where I wasn't planning on meeting someone. But now, I find comfort in the same solitude that paralyzed me when I was younger. I can seek out quiet corners that let me look out, towards water, towards

other people, towards something else rather than imagining there's a spotlight on me,
inviting unwanted eyes. I can just be.

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METRO DIARIES

When I began my internship in D.C. in the summer of 2012, I was okay with the idea of having to take the metro every day. I had graduated just over a year ago from college. In that time I had worked at a string of jobs—behind the counter at the bagel shop I worked at during summers as a teen, as an instructional aide at a high school, even a dog sitter. I had also started my masters program at grad school. But now, I would be cutting back on my semester hours and be joining the communications team at a labor union, ready to help out however I was asked and learn the tricks of the trade. On my first day of commuting, I was even a little excited about taking the train—like a real big girl. Taking a seat on the orange vinyl cushion, I felt grown-up, mature, independent. The possibilities of being a metropolitan career woman spread out before me like the tracks that I would soon be traversing.

The first days went by easily enough--I never got lost, mostly because my route was a straight shot on the Orange line from my home in suburban northern Virginia to downtown D.C., and I didn't fall onto the tracks or get caught in the car doors or anything of that nature. The problem I immediately ran into however, dealt with something entirely different: I didn't know where to look.

On good days, an open seat would be available and I would be able to rest my weary, wedge-heeled feet and sit down. On these occasions, I could close my eyes for a

power nap, or stare out the window, or play on my phone. There were plenty of perfectly good resting places for my peepers to land. But, during the more probable times that I had to stand in an aisle, or doorway, or someone else's personal space, my eyeballs freaked out a little. Every way they glanced, another human being occupied the space. Some had their backs turned, but others met my glance, or could be seen in the reflection of the dark glass when in the tunnels.

This violated all eye etiquette. I tried to concentrate my glances at metal poles, metro signage, or look *through* the multitudes of people around me but it didn't work. Every time I did this, I could still feel pairs of eyes boring into me, dissecting my appearance and innermost thoughts. The likely imagined but burning stares of strangers made me fidget, making me stand out even more, I am sure.

I began to notice that, in response to this fear of onlookers, my mouth had developed an odd habit. While trying to look as cool and calm as I could, I would subconsciously suck my cheeks. I would be fervently trying to stare through a train door and then I would realize that my cheeks and throat were sore, and only then would notice what I was doing. Was I trying to make it look like my cheeks were not so plump? Whatever it was, it was part of my shielding mechanism apparently. The only solution to the eye placement problem, I found, was to simply stare at the floor. This was the only place where you are not at risk of colliding eyeballs with someone else, and it lessens the force of people's stares, real or imagined, but doesn't eliminate it. Although I became a pro at staring at the train floor, I have found that it strains the eyes a bit. It really takes some effort to look down for thirty minutes, with only the briefest intervals of

staring through poles and seats, or on special occasions, counting threads in the sweater that is eight centimeters in front of your face.

I became well acquainted with the threadbare, maroon hued carpeting of the metro, with its bits of lint and dirt here and there. But, if anything, what really took up most of my floor-viewing time, was shoe gazing. This became a sort of pastime of mine. Through shoe gazing, I developed quite an appreciation of men's shoes. I cannot say that I had ever really paid attention to the general footwear of the male species before, but now my eyes had been opened. Fine brown and black leathers, square-toed shoes and rather pointy male shoes, tassels, stitching, and weaving, all helped me pass the time. As a teen, I had a best friend named Mara—when we had sleepovers we liked to look at fashion magazines and play a game called “pick your favorite,” in which we simply would look at the various spreads and pick our favorites. This simple game kept us occupied for hours. In a similar fashion, when I was on the train I'd play this game with the shoes on the men that I saw. I'd take mental note of best quality ones as well as the shoes that stood out as exquisitely poor in taste. Those fellows tended to have round toed, clunky shoes that lacked any other detail. Worst of all though, was the male who donned the casual sneaker/dress shoe. These are often a shade of brown that clashes horribly with gray or black dress pants which, in the case of the sneaker/dress shoe wearer, are also usually untailored or have a peculiar pattern.

Of course, there was also the joy of observing the female shoe. I liked finding other women who wore similar shoes as mine, to reassure myself that I was making good fashion choices. For example, on a day that I was wearing shiny black pointy flats

adorned with a bow, I spotted at least two others wearing pointy flat shoes with a bow, and I was content. I would also look for the fashionistas who donned stiletto heels on the moving train, and discuss with my mind their varying levels of craziness, based on the height of their heels. The array of colors, materials, and style of my fellow D.C. working women's shoes provided some spice to my daily commutes. When I would see a bright orange platform sandal with rhinestones amongst the gray, it was as though I had spotted a rare, exotic bird in the wild landscape of a dark jungle.

Another shoe game I liked to play was "Is that really their work shoe or a transition shoe?" When I started working in the city, I knew that I would see plenty of people who wore more comfortable shoes for their time in transit, who would later change into more work-appropriate ones. Women in power suits are often seen in dingy sneakers, and I've spotted men wearing sports jackets and ties with Crocs on. However absurd this may have looked, these folks were simply sparing their feet from added pain, especially after a long day. But sometimes, I'd have a hunch that someone wasn't wearing "transition" shoes, but genuinely planned to wear flip-flops into the office, and this wasn't just on casual Fridays. These folks were usually identified with the help of the rest of their outfits. Oversize dress pants and un-tucked button-downs were a red flag that the guy next to you may really be wearing his clogs to the office meeting, and low cut shirts and high hem lines on the ladies usually signaled that the flip flops on the end of those long legs were staying on all day.

It all sounds a bit judgmental, but it helped me to pass the time, occupy my eyes, and make me feel less self-conscious. It's now been four and a half years since I first

started working downtown, and although I remain at the same job, my experience is almost completely different. I almost always get a seat because after that first summer, they added more trains on the Orange line during rush hour, so I'm much more likely to avoid having to awkwardly find a place to stare, or I can read in peace. And when I do have to stand, as is more likely during the periodic phases of track work that now plague the entire metro system, I'm now rather un-phased by the people around me. I still don't like to make direct eye contact with strangers, but my veteran eyes no longer seem to care where they land, and my body has certainly stopped subconsciously sucking in my cheeks. I also am a hardcore user of transition shoes. In the summer I wear flip-flops until I get into my building, waiting until the last moment to throw on heels. In the colder months, its furry boots and cozy moccasins.

Over time, my sense of excitement, or at least amusement about what I've observed on the metro has changed dramatically. The daily train ride, coupled with a bus-ride or drive down Route-66 back to my neighborhood, only exhausts me now. Some days it takes an hour and 15 minutes, but most of the time it's closer to two, and on very bad days it's even more. The increasing cost of all the transportation frustrates me as well. But it all might be tolerable if I enjoyed the work I did each day—the whole reason I commute in the first place. When I began as an intern, I thought there were many possibilities, and there were. But those possibilities turned into realities that differed from the dreams I had in my head. I wonder if I'm making much of a difference in the lives of the members of the union I work for, or if the work I do makes an impact in any way. By now, at age 27, I thought I would have accomplished much more in my career and in my

personal life than I have. This is a common thought among my close peers, but it's a daunting feeling nonetheless. We're all on different paths than the ones we set out on.

My own complacency is partially to blame for my unhappiness in my career—there was a time when I tried harder than I do now, but I lost some of my drive along the way. I could become better at networking, but I prefer to keep to the circles I'm already in, and when I leave the office, I don't want to think about work until I return. My predicament is not uncommon. I've occasionally applied to other jobs. But even in the few instances where I've taken an interview, I think about my great benefits, my routine that I've become so accustomed to, and the fun work trips I've been on, and I stop myself from moving forward. Yet, I know that I don't want to settle for just this, for a common life or career. Right now, I feel confined to one section of track in a vast metropolitan system. How do I find my way?

“Sodom! Gomorrah!” screamed a pale woman with long, scraggly hair in a modest gray blouse and slacks.

“The Messiah!” yelled a man with creamy brown skin in a long, white gown, his dreadlocks twisted up into a turban.

These were the only words I was able to catch of the loud rants of two people pacing back and forth across the platform of Farragut West station, luckily on the opposite side of the tracks. It was not clear whether the pair were in cahoots, or whether their loud, almost chant-like musings were sparring with each other.

This scene played out during the early months of my internship. The two voices

that rang out, echoing among the Belgian waffle-like divots in the ceiling reminded me of similar displays witnessed during my study abroad trip to London, where a walk through Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park was anything but tame. From a safe distance, with two sets of electrified track between us, it was easy to scoff at the man and woman as perhaps lunatics—fanatics wound up in their own misguided narratives. But the venom in their voices still put me on edge.

As a metro-rider, I've witnessed plenty of similar outbursts since. For a time, an older woman made a habit of boarding different cars at different stations so that she could get her message to as many sleepy morning riders as possible as she slowly traversed the aisles. That message was usually blaming some sort of tragedy or death on we who supported gay marriage and abortion. God was punishing us all for these sins. Sometimes she would shout this in someone's face, other times it was more general. I always made sure to look down, pretending to be asleep when she came on board. My blood boiling behind my closed lids.

I've seen many people ask for money, moving between train cars in a similar fashion, hoping to find generous donors. When I have a spare dollar or coins, I sometimes give them. Once, a man in ill-fitting jeans and a white wife-beater, sweating from the day's warmth, begged anyone for a job. He had just been released from jail, he implored, anything would help. I dug around in my bag for him, only to pull out a thin dime. It looked insulting in my damp palm, but I held it to him. He thanked me but grew frustrated as he moved on, on the verge of hysteric tears. My body tensed, partially anticipating a violent outburst, and partially overcome with grief for him. He exited the

car when the train came to a halt.

With so many people in close proximity to one another, I've also been privy to many personal conversations. Take for instance, the older woman on my bus one day, who spent almost twenty minutes on the phone trying to console someone who I assume was her adult daughter, about the daughter's baby daddy issues. Over and over she told the daughter to "pray about it". I felt like an intruder in their important conversation—able to assume and judge from my seat on the bus.

Not all overheard conversations are downers of course. One afternoon I listened to a young father chat with a middle-aged woman sitting next to him about knitting, all the way from Farragut West to West Falls Church. The man knit socks for his baby, and socks for his wife--he had never needed to throw away a pair of socks, ever, thanks to his ability to mend them himself. The poor woman, who was not knitting herself, but might have enjoyed knitting prior to the conversation, listened on as her enthusiastic seatmate explained his techniques, described the tools used, and reminisced about how he was raised as a knitter. She was a trooper.

Sometimes, when you are tired of whatever you have been reading on the train, it's more enjoyable to read what someone else is reading. I often, though stealthily, read the front pages of newspapers over someone's shoulder to see what was happening in the world. If someone has a book spread open nearby, or a glowing Kindle, I try to look at the top of the page to see what they're reading, and if intriguing, continue down the page for as long as I'm unnoticed. It's fun to see if what someone is reading matches the personality you have created in your mind for that person.

2013 was the height of *50 Shades of Gray* popularity, and there were countless women on the train reading from any of the trilogy that year, including myself. I could tell that some women tried to be discreet by reading it on their I-pads, but I caught a few of them red-handed. And once, a young man sitting diagonally in front of me on the bus spent a lot of time sending some carefully worded text messages on an older flip-phone that happened to be in my direct line of sight—text messages that would have made Mr. Gray himself blush.

My best friend Carrie has an aunt that also worked in D.C. for many years, before retiring. I spoke at length with Carrie's Aunt Boo about her daily trips on the metro as well, and she related to many of my stories. She too often found herself reading things over people's shoulders that she perhaps should not have: documents labeled "Private", "Top Secret", and "Not for Distribution". Aunt Boo could not believe how many government and agency workers had unknowingly flashed such information.

Aunt Boo rode the metro for so long, that every day, she sat in the same seat in the very last car of the train with the same people, and they became friends who meet regularly to this day. I sometimes recognize some of the same people over time—some ride the same bus as me or get off the train at the same stop. I wonder how long they've been working where they do, how long they've been commuting. Do they like the convenience of the metro, or have they grown tired? Every now and then, I realize how much has transpired in my life since I began my daily D.C. commutes, and am startled to realize how many days on end I have made the same trip. Sometimes it seems as though it has all gone by in a blur, and that I am just a life-like robot, shuttling through tunnels

until I step off and ascend back up into daylight, into the real world.

About two years before I began my job in D.C., when I was still in college, I took the train into the city to visit a friend on her lunch break. She lived further out in the suburbs than I did, but had a summer job downtown. I hadn't taken the metro alone before, but I arrived to meet her just fine. On the way back things were going smoothly until I looked at my phone, thinking that it was taking quite a while to get home. It was, and looking out the windows, I realized that I was now in an area I had never seen before, across the river. I had gotten on the right color train line, but gone in the wrong direction, for more than 30 minutes. I had nothing I needed to race home for, but I felt panicked. Sheepishly, I called my mom to ask how exactly I should get home. At the next stop I quickly got off and found the right train. My mom picked me up when I got to the end of the line.

When I see teens or tourists looking at the multi-colored system maps these days, I feel relieved that I no longer need them, and I happily help them figure out where they're going. Although I still hate my commute most of the time, when I see that my friends don't know their way around the metro, and I have to help navigate us to our destination, I feel a strange sense of pride rise up within myself. It's nothing to brag about—thousands of people do it every day, but I feel a sense of comraderie with all the other riders who put in their time every day on the tracks and in the tunnels. I feel like the young, somewhat urban, somewhat independent woman that I am. And I'm good with that.

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MEMORIES IN MAINE

As I approached the end of my freshman year of high school, my parents purchased a modest lake cabin in Maine, where we would spend many summer vacations and long weekends in years to come. The lake on which the red house sat on was called Beach Hill Pond—it wasn't uncommon for the many lakes in the area to sometimes be referred to as ponds. That first summer, our family of four “moved in,” after hauling old and inherited furniture in a U-Haul up the coast. The neighbors we soon met whom spent their summers on the lake informed us that each “camp,” as they called the cabins and little houses, was typically given a name. After tossing around a few ideas, we agreed to name our camp “Loonah Landing.” A name proudly concocted by my dad, we dubbed it so in part because of the Loons that visited the cove that our cabin was nestled on, as well as for the views of the moon that could be seen from the back deck on clear nights. The name was of course also a tribute to the New England, and specifically Mainer (Main-ah), accent. That Christmas, my Grandpa carved and painted a sign for our new summer home. At the top, he had etched out the name, Loonah Landing. Below that, he engraved a family of four loons, floating, still ripples cascading around them on a wooden lake. The sign has been in our makeshift yard at the cabin ever since.

Aside from members of my family, Loonah Landing has had many visitors over the years: friends of my grandparents, extended family and their friends, my parents'

friends, friends of my sister and I, boyfriends. Most of them have written at least a short passage in a guestbook we keep in the living room that looks out onto the water—it was another thing we were told is common to have in the camps that dot the shoreline of Beech Hill Pond. Occasionally, my parents use the guest book like a diary, documenting what they did each day or on each trip, sometimes with lengthy asides or rich descriptions of the summer, winter, or fall scenery. Somehow though, the guest book’s pages haven’t been exhausted in the 12 years we’ve owned the cabin. If one were to flip through its pages, they’d see entries from perhaps fifteen different people, spanning more than a decade. There are many, but each impression left is relatively brief—quick proof of a vacation well spent.

The last time I took a friend with me to Loonah Landing was two years ago, when my girlfriend Zoe accompanied my parents and me. We travelled there in October to run the Mount Desert Island Half Marathon, a perfect time to see the brilliant fall foliage. I hadn’t seen Maine in autumn in years; the buzzing summer lake was now mostly still, except for the occasional kayaker or pair of loons. It felt peaceful and lonely.

Zoe was thrilled to be travelling and away from her parents whom she still lived with, like I did. Although I was anxious to move in with my fiancé Richard at the time, I had been living back at home since graduating college—we were comfortable and close. Zoe on the other hand had tried to find work out in California after spending an extra semester at school before graduating, and had recently moved back home after striking out. I showed her around the places we had fallen in love with over the years: we walked along the wooded roads that led to our lakeshore, crunching through the ample layers of

dry leaves, and then through the dusty blueberry fields that were turning their brilliant fall red. An amateur photographer, Zoe snapped pictures of everything we saw that trip, especially of the neighbors' dogs whenever they scampered by—the few families that lived on Beech Hill Pond year-round usually let their dogs roam freely. She also ate lobster roll after lobster roll with joy—something I had never partaken in due to my aversion to seafood, yet was strangely pleased to see other people enjoy.

On our last evening at Loonah Landing that trip, Zoe and I took out the green L.L. Bean kayak and paddled beyond the mouth of our cove, into open water, coming back in as the sun was setting. Just a few months earlier, Richard and my friend Hannah had somehow managed to flip the same kayak over while they were in it. Richard doesn't know how to swim but thankfully had been wearing his life jacket. I didn't see them tip over in the water, just witnessed the neighbors on their jet-skis, helping fish them out of the lake and righting the upturned kayak—but my heart had pounded heavy in my chest as I watched them from a distance. I fretted over Richard like a mother would her child when he was in the water; his dense muscles and lack of body fat left him without an ounce of buoyancy.

Richard, Hannah, and a handful of other close friends had joined my sister Sarah and me that Fourth of July in Maine for the first time, with the exception of Richard, who had been to Loonah Landing at least two other summers. My dad had driven up with Sarah, Richard and me to help open up the cabin and get our small boat and Jet Ski in the water. The next day, the others arrived and my dad cooked a seafood stew for dinner, receiving rave reviews, before heading back home the next morning. I showed everyone

the sights, as I later would with Zoe that fall, and we all spent several days feasting, drinking, and laughing, and several nights sitting around the fire and looking up at the stars—more stars, some say, than they’ve ever seen in their life. Everyone had a fantastic time, and didn’t want to leave. My friend Souzan purchased a loon figurine in Bar Harbor to leave in the cabin, as many other visitors had done, and most of my friends left a note in the guestbook.

I had been overjoyed to share the family getaway that I loved so much with my friends who had never been, yet the trip hadn’t been all I had hoped. I had ended up fighting with my sister Sarah a good deal—something we didn’t do often—so much so that we ended one night in a screaming match. It was the fourth and we had all been drinking, but Sarah had become so intoxicated that she was walking around without pants or underwear on, after having agreed to a skinny-dipping dare. She giggled as she teetered around, a thin, damp sweater partially covering her bare bottom. Everyone loved my sister and laughed with her, but, fiercely protective, I demanded she put on clothes. She did eventually, but they somehow came off again. I had already exhausted myself trying to convey to her the first time around that I didn’t want everyone seeing her this way, but she had lashed out, claiming I was embarrassed of her. Over the last year that had led up to her graduation from college and subsequent move home, I had become increasingly aware of her excessive drinking, her many sexual partners, and an irksome lack of concern for authority. But I wasn’t ashamed—only concerned. She was my best friend and baby sister, and having gained some retrospect from my own post-college experiences, I was alarmed at this new behavior. It hurt me that she only thought I was

being judgmental, that I was ashamed of her somehow. I felt an intense fear in my gut that my little sister, my best friend, was going down a bad path, and that she was straying from me.

I went to bed sobbing. I looked to Richard to console me or help me keep an eye on Sarah that night, but he too had imbibed too much, and could only hold me close as he came to bed and fell heavy with sleep.

Ever since our other friends had arrived, I felt distanced from him most of the trip too. Being the host, I had taxied several people to and from the airport, and had been busy helping to set up the house and make sure everyone had what they needed. I wanted to help create a fun experience for my friends, but while I was occupied, Richard was jet skiing, drinking, and laughing with everyone else. We were there together, and he was simply enjoying himself, but I wished that he had been helping me more. I felt a little left out, and lonely, despite being with all of my friends.

The feeling was subtle, and I tried not to dwell on it, tried not to feel sorry for myself--I was lucky to share such a place with the people I loved. But looking back, I now know that Richard probably was in fact distant that trip. He was happy to be distracted by a plethora of alcohol, or the shenanigans of our friends. That fall, a few weeks after I would return from the Maine trip with Zoe, Richard would tell me that he had slept with someone else, a coworker that he had been texting and talking to for about six months. I would be beside myself, yet still want to be with him. I would ask if he still wanted to marry me, and he would tell me yes. A few short weeks later I would realize that he didn't want to still marry me.

It's now been two years since we called off the wedding, but even after that, we didn't quit each other cold turkey. That time has been filled with misunderstandings, counseling, more tears than I thought I could ever have, months of silence and uncertainty, and long distance phone calls. We tried to make a relationship work. I told myself I was okay with not marrying Richard *right now* as long as we could be together still. I became a person who made decisions that weren't in her best interest—telling myself to trust him still, closing myself off from other guys, believing that he would change--because the love I had for Richard was more powerful than any other emotion inside me. Sometimes it still is, even though I'm no longer his, even though he has hurt me more than I could have ever fathomed.

There's an entry in the Maine guestbook from Richard, from the first or second time he travelled to Beech Hill Pond with my family and me. I don't recall its details but I can imagine it contains his thoughts on the many types of seafood he enjoyed and a quick note of gratitude for being invited, peppered with a few childlike doodles that he often included on greetings cards and love notes. Last summer, I once again made the summer trip to Loonah Landing, the first visit back since the trip with Zoe, when I was still engaged—I didn't bring anyone this time, but I enjoyed the company of my family, and Sarah and her boyfriend Matt. I wondered if it would feel different this trip. Although I was still talking to Richard every day, we no longer lived in the same state, and were no longer in an official relationship. But I was still holding on, still thought there could be a future. I wanted to go back and read what Richard had written, but couldn't bring myself

to do so. Instead, I drank beers brewed in Maine, hiked up the mountains of Mount Desert Island, and floated lazily in the waist-deep water beyond our dock.

When I returned from Maine this July, I joined a dating app, and am now dating a guy named Ryan. Ryan is quietly smart and he's driven. He's a kind person and treats me wonderfully. I want to let myself become smitten with him, as I feel he is with me, but I feel stuck, trapped in the past that still isn't my past. I don't speak to Richard anymore, but I still dream about him, am still overcome with sadness some nights when I'm driving alone, or when I hear a song that reminds me of us. As we both move on, on different paths, I find myself wanting to cling to all of the bits and pieces of him that I have left. I want to fly up to Loonah Landing and gently tear out the pages he has written, in the child-like handwriting of his I know so well, and after I have read them, carefully tuck them away somewhere safe. That I can hold on to.

The summer after my sophomore year in college, I brought my friend Carrie along on our annual trip to Maine. Carrie had been my random roommate during our first year at Virginia Tech, and we had somehow managed to become best friends despite our many differences. Carrie had quickly felt at home with the rest of my family, and was always up for an adventure. As we jet-skied around the lake one day, we puttered slowly into an inlet down towards the end of the lake, admiring a seaplane that was tethered to a nearby dock.

A man on shore fiddled around with something up near his house. I sat on the back of the Jet Ski as Carrie motored closer.

“Is this your plane?” Carrie had shouted to him. I winced with embarrassment at first, but relaxed when he called back, amused.

“Sure is!” he said.

“Can you take us for a ride?” Carrie continued, to my amazement.

Chuckling, the man paused a moment, and then hollered back, “Well I suppose I could.”

He invited us to tie off the Jet Ski on his dock, and come sit inside for a drink of water while he introduced himself. He was from New York but had spent many summers on Beech Hill Pond with his family. His wife and two grown daughters were away for the day. I felt as though I was on a sitcom where the protagonists of the show were either about to find themselves in a heap of trouble, or end up having a once-in-a-lifetime experience with someone they never saw again, left with only a great story to tell.

Luckily for us, it was the latter. The kind man took Carrie and me up in his plane, one at a time, and we glided noisily over neighboring lakes that looked more like swamps from above. Over the motor he told us the names of the different bodies of water and the surrounding mountains and what he knew of their histories. My body clenched the entire time, my jaw set tight, for it felt as though we might fall out of the sky at any moment, and that the impact of the rickety tin contraption we sat in would send us flying in a thousand pieces as we landed on the water, but neither of those things happened. When I stepped back onto the dock Carrie greeted us excitedly: “wasn’t that amazing?” she screamed. The sunlight gleamed off the small waves that made the plane bob up and down as its owner tethered it back to the dock, and I finally let out a long breath.

That night my dad cooked whole lobsters and grilled corn on the cob and we rehashed our story for the whole family as we ate outside on our chipping red picnic table. I ate mostly baked potatoes and corn as Carrie tried boiled lobster for the first time. She enjoyed it until prying open the parts with the green, gooey “lobster poop”—as my dad put it.

The next year, Richard would come for his first visit to Maine. When Carrie had accompanied me, she’d roll her eyes every time I got a call from Richard, knowing that I would be occupied for the next twenty minutes or so as we recounted our days to each other, and said our I miss yous and I love yous. When Carrie found out I was bringing Richard with me that year instead of her, she’d been unable to hide her angry hurt. I felt bad at first but the feeling was overshadowed by excitement at bringing Richard on a family trip for the first time. He would only be able to stay for a few days because he had to get back to his summer job, but it was something.

Being an avid seafood lover, Richard was in shellfish heaven once we arrived at the lake. The “lobster poop” didn’t stop him from consuming his boiled lobster from antennae to tail. It satisfied me to see him eat the food I hated with such pleasure. He and my dad also shared a love of scallops. After returning from a short excursion to Bangor one evening during that trip, my dad walked into the cabin and set down a plate of several jumbo scallops, the size of large table coasters, in front of Richard on the coffee table. I had never seen scallops so large. Richard’s eyes went big and his teeth gleamed as a smile stretched across his face. The memory of my dad cooking up those scallops

Richard that night, simply because he knew he liked them, still remains one of my favorites.

Karina Sixbey was my best friend throughout my adolescent years. We knew each other better than I had ever known anyone, and even though she had three sisters, I felt like I was the fifth Sixbey daughter. I was over at her house most of my free time, and when we were apart we talked on the phone or wrote notes to pass to each other in the hallway—savoring them like candy to enjoy later.

At some point near the transition from high school to college, I can recall her subtly asking why she had never come to Maine with me. She had said it suddenly, as though something had reminded her of it. I remember being taken aback by the question, having to think for an answer.

“Yeah, gosh, you’re gonna have to come this year!” I told her. But I realized that I knew the reason I hadn’t explicitly asked her to join me before. I already knew she wouldn’t actually come. In early high school, I travelled with Karina’s family for a week to Chincoteague Island on their annual summer vacation, and had been on countless other weekend road trips with them. She had accompanied me with my own family on Girl Scout encampments, to my sister’s soccer tournaments, and other adventures. Then one summer, Karina was invited to come to stay at the Outer Banks with my family and me at a rented beach house. I had been eagerly counting down the weeks until our trip, and excitedly shared with her handwritten lists scrawled in crayon, bulleting the activities we were going to do, and what items she should pack. About a week out from the trip, I was

cleaning out kitty litter boxes in our laundry room when Mrs. Sixbey called my house, and asked to speak with my mom. I could make out bits of the muffled conversation as I scooped, but when my mom said “of course we understand” I knew that Karina wouldn’t be coming to the beach with me after all.

Mom then came in to gently tell me what I already knew, saying that, with Karina’s older sister Alissa heading off to college in a few weeks, the sisters wanted time to spend with each other. I knew that the excuse was partially true, but I also knew it wasn’t really why Karina wasn’t coming. She had waited until the last minute, and then couldn’t tell me herself that she wasn’t coming. I think that part of her had wanted to come with me to the beach, but more of her would have felt out of her element. She was more comfortable around her own family and what she knew.

When we got together, Karina and I felt completely ourselves. We told each other absolutely everything and came out of our shells. Together we were braver, silly, unstoppable. But in public—at school or in other social situations, Karina could be painfully shy, and sometimes simply standoffish. I was shy too, but seeing her freeze up and skip out on certain events because of her anxiety around others made me wish I could shake her—I felt so sad for her. But she had known me and mine for years, so I was still taken aback to get this call, in the eleventh hour. She had done similar things before, cancelled plans at the last minute, or not answered my calls when we were trying to finalize plans—sometimes it was because of a boyfriend she had become smitten with, other times she was mad at me for a reason she never shared, and other times I didn’t

know. I always shrugged it off, or just pouted around the house until I found something else to do. But this felt bigger.

In retrospect, it wasn't a huge issue—I was still going on a paid vacation with my family—but at that age it felt like the end of the world, and it hurt that my best friend didn't feel comfortable enough or excited enough to go on this trip with me.

From that point on, I didn't try to invite Karina on anymore of my family trips. So when several years later Karina brought up the idea of going to Maine, I genuinely hoped that someday she would, but I mostly doubted it.

Karina never did make it to Maine. Mid-way through my sophomore year of college, my friendship with her ended. It had been fraying for months, since about the time I started dating Richard. Richard was my first real boyfriend, and we soon dedicated much of our time to each other. I still hung out with Karina often, especially since her boyfriend was also Richard's best friend, but when Richard and Karina began to not get along, I was constantly caught in the middle of fights I wanted no part in. Karina had never had to share my time with anyone other than my family, and Richard didn't understand why she could be so cold sometimes.

During my fall semester that year, I texted and called her often, but I received fewer and fewer responses. When we did talk, she'd chalk her absences up to being busy with homework and work, and to the fact she had started playing for her school's club soccer team too. That winter break, Richard deleted Karina as a friend on Facebook. Karina was so upset and hurt by it, that she wouldn't talk to me, even though I hadn't known at first that Richard had even done so. I told her I was sorry that he did it, and that

it was childish, but still she would not respond. It wasn't until a few days after Christmas that I received a text from her as I sat on our couch in Maine, where my mom, dad, Sarah and me had spent our holiday. I told her that Richard's actions had nothing to do with my feelings for her, as my best friend, and that I didn't want their differences to come between us. She apologized, but in the next few months it was more of the same. By the summer, we had fallen out, and we never repaired what had been broken.

Loonah Landing is an escape. Yes, it's a vacation home, but for the people who have passed through, or who return year after year, it's a place to get away from something. Zoe was able to enjoy a few days without the guilt that her mother constantly made her feel. Several family members and friends have gone to stay there after their parents' or spouses' deaths, family hardships, and divorce. We may not have ever even settled on buying Loonah Landing if it had not been for my grandma passing away years ago, but it was a place that helped my dad through the grieving. It's a place to get away from dark thoughts, or at least come to terms with them--a place that continues to be a refuge from work and traffic back home. The house has been witness to brief moments of our lives, capturing the essence of who we are in that time and space--through scribbles in old coloring books kept there for when we were bored, through handwritten notes in a guestbook, and the photographs snapped and sometimes hung on the walls. It knows more about us than the walls we are surrounded by day to day, because it can so easily compare who we are when we visit to who were the last time we came through.

The last time Richard was at Loonah Landing, I think he was in the midst of trying to escape, period. I don't think he wanted to get away from me specifically--he still cared about me deeply. But during that time in his life, and perhaps most other times in his life too, he has dealt with dark things that take away his happiness, that make him want to move on to something else, something to make him feel anything other than what he's feeling. He wanted to escape his current life, and that life included me. The things I wanted—a marriage, children some day, a stable family life—he wasn't sure of. As a child of Ghanian immigrants, Richard had been raised in the utter opposite manner from what Sarah and I had experienced. Holidays were mostly ordinary days. Even the food from his favorite, Thanksgiving, was enjoyed in separate rooms. Bad grades, bad reports, and anything deemed to be bad behavior was met with physical punishments—bibles to the side of the head, wooden spoons to the rear, slaps to the face. Home was not a refuge from bullies who made fun of his stutter or his baby fat, it was a continuation of it. Vacations didn't happen. There were no Maine trips or anything of the sort. I always knew these things haunted Richard, but it took me a long time to realize the extent to which his childhood shaped him.

I think part of me will always hold on to a small hope, just a little chance, that somehow, all of the wrongs will be righted and Richard and I will be each other's again. I rationalize scenarios, telling myself it happens in movies and books all the time—people leave their current lovers to be with a long lost first love, or some horrible tragedy shakes someone so much so, that they are able to see what truly matters in life, and they drop everything to go find that person they hadn't talked to in years. But the smarter, rational

me knows that isn't likely, and that it really isn't what's best. It knows that it's time to move on, but that the little pieces of Richard will always be there, that they will always shape me. We shared happy times, some that the Maine house bore witness to, as it did with other people who have passed in and out of my life, and that of my family. Like ripples, I'm sure that in time, the memories of the bad, as well as the still vivid images of the so very good, will both fade, slowly becoming less and less. I don't want any of it to ever disappear, for I would feel like part of me had died somehow, but I don't want them to continue to hold me back, in the surreal place that I've been stuck in for so long. There will be new visitors to Loonah Landing, along with the old.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mia C. Perry grew up in Virginia. She attended Virginia Tech, where she received her Bachelor of Arts in English. She went on to receive her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2017. She will continue her career in communications and pursuing creative writing.