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Superbloom

Moira Frances Johnston
Wellesley College, mjohnst3@wellesley.edu

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SUPERBLOOM

Moira Johnston

Superbloom

Moira Frances Johnston

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in English and Creative Writing
under the advisement of Marilyn Sides

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For Dad

For Mom

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PREFACE

This collection seeks to balance a concrete sense of place with a concrete sense of character. To do so, nonfictional travel essays about places I've been and places that hold meaning in my life alternate with prose fiction pieces set in the same locale.

In the creative nonfiction, I present variety in each narrative: from the traditional travel account of a tourist in Denmark, to a temporary expatriate studying and living in England, to a native of Los Angeles finding interesting aspects about growing up in a bizarre city she deems normal. Throughout the travel essays I worked to hone my personal voice; punching up the humor and self-deprecation, as well as writing moments of introspective poignancy was something I maintained in each essay in the nonfiction genre. Characters and plotlines drawn from nonfictional details in the travel essays elevate the setting in each subsequent prose fiction until place and person are equally multifaceted.

The corresponding prose fiction pieces provide fluidity between the travel writing and the fiction, using specificity of places and moments to connect both genres. By starting the entire writing process with nonfiction and jumping back into short fiction, I could set creative characters in concrete worlds already presented to the reader. Because these pieces center on place and person, the importance of plot becomes secondary. Characters in the three fiction pieces experience frustration, awareness and acknowledgement of mundanity, yet ultimately settle on stasis because

the portrayal and resolution of the setting, not of the main character, is paramount. The creation of fictional characters superimposed onto previously established nonfictional destinations allows readers to steep in realities where the location has authorial control.

Since I couldn't pinpoint these ineffable qualities such cities hold with strictly travel writing, I turned to fiction. Alternating between fiction and nonfiction using a common setting presents a reader with a more complete picture of how a certain place can or cannot alter its inhabitants. Capturing and tracking the nostalgia of certain places in both fiction and nonfiction gives a more valiant attempt at giving words to feelings and experiences once beyond description.

All In

fiction

Danes whirred by on whimsical bicycles and one nearly ploughed him down when he blindly stepped from the sidewalk to catch a better glimpse of a couple distant rooftops.

Lena's voiced floated away with suggestions of what they would see that day as Ben surveyed the city around him. They stood inconveniently in the center of a square, catty-corner to their apartment. Each building was a different shade of cheerful, reds and pinks and oranges surrounded gray paving stones. An oddly modern sculpture had landed in the center of the square. Its marble was cooling, unwilling to yield if you put your hand upon its seamless surface. It stood guard over the small restaurants and cafes huddled around it. The air was biting. He wanted his scarf, but was afraid to ask Lena if he could jog back to the apartment to get it.

There were two others in their group: Margery and Sonia. Both had no real impact on the dynamic. Sonia was perfectly nice. Margery was jumping hurdles from tolerable, right across the border to insufferable. When clustered around a bus stop the previous night, the other girls had been discussing flaws. Lena complained her flaxen hair was too straight for her tastes and made other self-deprecating jokes about her full thighs, Sonia chipped in about her own head of curls, and Caty chirped away about her slight hips and wiry brown hair that looked like a small vole atop her head. Ben was

craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the canals around the corner when he overheard Margery cheerily explain that she's never had a bad hair day to date.

They kept walking. Lena had yapped her orders and with a turn of her heel she ventured towards the path next to the canal. Ben meandered at the back of the herd for several minutes as they passed through pristine groves of trees. Lena, still glancing behind her to watch the others, made him feel like a duckling trailing behind a perpetually frustrated mother. Ben laughed to himself at the idea of Lena as a mother.

She makes too many dead baby jokes to ever take parenting seriously, he thought.

Ben moseyed to a tree, so brightly crimson his eyes had to adjust, and took several photos from several different angles. He enjoyed perfecting an angle.

They arrived at the statue and watched her mournful face staring off into the distance. Ben stared at her for several seconds. The boulder she sat on rose higher than the others, and tourists would stand on one of the rocks surrounding her and lean against her tail, sickly grins slapped on their wind-chapped faces. Ben didn't want to grin. He was insulted by the blatant disrespect these people held for her. His mind meandered to trains of thought piled high with 'they-won't-understand' and 'no-one-loves-her-like-I-love-her' tied in perfect bows presenting his clichéd insecurities. He chuckled softly at the thoughts and derailed them for they had no basis in his reality. It's just a statue. It's just art, he felt no genuine attachment to the frozen face apart from

disgust over grimy 12-year-old hands reaching for her chest or zooming in with cell phone cameras to show friends the perverted mementos collected abroad.

He stood precariously on a rock and looked at her bronze-cast body before he felt his foot slide. He teetered on one leg and looked back at the others. Their backs were towards him. He didn't mind.

His foot gave way and he slid down the face of the rock, he tumbled backwards into the shallow water below and lay beneath the surface, seawater permeating his sweater. The water was relaxing. He didn't feel anxious. He wanted to stay there for as long as his lungs would allow. He opened his eyes and the cold stung them. He could make out wavering shapes of people on land leaning towards him, their surreal limbs outstretched to pull him up back towards the mermaid.

Learning to Copenhagen

nonfiction

I expected to go abroad in college. Someone—likely my mother—told me that’s what you do your junior year. In Bath, England, my program for the semester revealed delectable four-day weekends. Each weekend, I expected to jet off to some unheard of locale on the Dorset coast, or hop an ungodly cheap airline to take a solo trip around Florence. I expected to be able to fund these weekends of self-discovery and clichéd adventure with the finances that would somehow come into my possession.

Two months in and I hadn’t traveled anywhere. I loved Bath so much, that once I established my weekend routine, I was unwilling to relinquish it to any of that solo-discovery crap. But I really needed to be able to rattle off an endless list of the faraway places I had visited by the time I went home to the States. Three weeks away from mid-semester break and I had zero plans, and zero ideas. Maria was my Golden Ticket.

One day in late September, I happened to overhear Maria and Sean discussing plans over lunch. Like the perfectly polite eavesdropper that I am, I elegantly inquired after their plans: “Oh, you guys are going to Copenhagen? Can I come?” Maria, who’s original plan had always been to visit her mother—a psychology professor teaching a semester at the Danish Institute of Study Abroad—was happy to let me in on the trip. Two other girls, Jane and Ariella, eventually joined the planning committee.

Everything came together rapidly after that, without really coming together at all. I have family friends outside Stockholm, so why don't we spend half the week with them? Sean had always wanted to go to Sweden ever since he read *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, so we'd spend three days in Stockholm after scheduling four days in Copenhagen.

The night before we were scheduled to leave, the group of us sat in the living room mulling over logistics and I felt an unfamiliarly gnawing sense of control. No one was taking charge of the group, and for some ungodly reason I felt inclined to do so.

"So how are we gonna get to the airport for a 6 a.m. flight on Friday?" Sean asked. We'd booked a room at a crummy Travelodge just outside Heathrow just a few days before, and he'd already forgotten.

I feigned patience, "The hotel has a shuttle."

"Right," he nodded apathetically.

We were leaving in just under a day, and that was the extent of our plans.

* * *

Denmark has consistently been ranked as one of the happiest countries in the world, which is intimidating for an American traveler who can't seem to tolerate people who smile while engaging in a boring conversation. All five of us thought the city would be dotted with neutral tones and persistently grey skies. We landed in the scarily efficient Copenhagen airport, which did adhere to our presumptions; like

everything else Danish, the focus was on the efficiency of the building design, warmth was not a priority. The entire terminal was opened up with floor-to-ceiling windows. A maze of escalators ushered travelers to individual terminals and gates, everything was streamlined and the only line we had to actively wait in was the Danish border force.

Maria's mom met us outside the terminal and led us to the Metro station that would take us into the city. One word from her mouth and everything I knew about Maria made sense. She had the overall demeanor of a cheerleader in a late-nineties public high school. Maria did, not her mom. Kathy had the overall demeanor of the mother of the late-nineties public high school cheerleader—everything she did was for her daughter.

Kathy led us across an enclosed platform to the Metro stop and tapped her card to let us all on the train car. She asked us all questions about our schools and ourselves, all while clutching a giddy Maria to her side. She looked to Jane. A Colorado native with barely kempt brown hair, she religiously wore a bright turquoise puffy jacket and carried her Nalgene everywhere. Jane probably drove a Subaru, complete with a smattering of bumper stickers lamenting the possible destruction of various nature preserves. The Granola Barbie Starter Pack, she could diffuse tense situations with a Kimmy-from-Full-House flair at the drop of a beanie. Kathy listened, smiling intently as Jane rambled about Wells College—a miniscule liberal arts school in the Finger

Lakes—and the fact that she really didn't feel like the youngest student in the program (she was a sophomore).

Kathy turned to Ariella—mid-primp, a tube of lipstick poised dangerously close to her bottom lip. Ariella, Maria, and Sean all went to Skidmore College, so Kathy had heard of them from Maria and their hoards of mutual friends. Still, she nodded as Ariella prattled on about her JAP-ness (Jewish American Princess), trying to bond with me over our mutual Jewishness, but how she was *such* a Persian Jew that the term *JAP* can't even be applied, but she went to school in the city so it's *basically* the same thing, but she lives on the Upper East Side, right where they filmed *Gossip Girl*. That was where I stopped her.

“Oh no way! You live in the city?”

“Yea!” She glanced at me.

“Whereabouts?”

“Like, upper nineties.”

“Oh right, like by Mount Sinai?” Not a filming location for *Gossip Girl*, but a hospital.

She nodded, and continued spewing information to Kathy, who quickly rerouted her attention to Sean, looming gloomily against a barrier on the train car. He had a very tall face, and wore a perpetually passive smirk. He had several pairs of corduroys. Sean moved from his post, unfolding to his actual height of 6'3". He dipped his head in

response to Kathy's questions about his major (English, of course), his plans after graduation (no clue), and how he's enjoying his time abroad (he was). His voice lilted at every other word like Eeyore on Xanax.

"So," Kathy directed her next question to the entire group. "What do you all want to get out of your trip to Copenhagen?"

Ariella wanted boutiques and tourist traps, Maria wanted anything, Jane wanted to explore, and I wanted museums and food and tourist traps.

"I want a 'dad' sweater," Sean tilted his head and looked slyly around the group.

"So your goal of this trip is to find a 'dad' sweater?" My left eyebrow rocketed up towards my hairline.

"Yeah," Sean's voice was moving away from meek, "I wanna find the hipster neighborhood and hit up some vintage stores."

"Hit up?" My eyebrow twitched.

"Yeah," he sounded practically defiant.

I looked around the group for someone to commiserate with. Someone to share a knowing glance, that 'holy shit can you believe this kid' look. Nothing. I was met with Maria and Kathy's caring smiles, Jane's jumpy eyes, and the back of Ariella's compact mirror.

“Okay, we’ll find the *hipster* neighborhoods of Copenhagen,” I smiled, my eyebrow hurt. “A city where everyone rides fixed-gear bikes and religiously eat farm-to-table.” Sean stared pointedly.

The Metro sped along past various stops with names I couldn’t pronounce.

“The Danish language is very weird,” Kathy laughed as we all took a stab at pronouncing the name of the next stop, Amager Strand. “There’s no ‘g’ sound, so Amager sounds like ‘amar.’”

The voice of an overly calm Danish woman was pumped through the train car at a comfortable decibel, notifying passengers of upcoming stops. We chuckled at our botched attempts to mimic her as the train barreled forward towards Nørreport, the stop by Kathy’s apartment where she was kindly letting us stay.

We emerged from the station heaving suitcases up slate-grey stairs and were hit with colors. Kathy charged ahead and we straggled along behind her through a huge cobblestone courtyard filled with food carts and flower stands billowing with soft petals snuggled in parchment. We passed buildings painted pastel pinks and buttery yellows, all while trying to dodge determined Danes on fixed-gear bicycles. The Danes ride bikes everywhere, they average a cool 5’11” and they all have the same remarkable smirk on their faces, an odd recognition of everyone who is not one of them.

We continue straight through a main walking street boasting rows of weird Danish niche clothing stores and coffee shops, and turned left at the Rundetaarn, the

Round Tower. It was exactly that: a hundred-foot beige stone tower built as an observatory under Christopher IV in the 17th-century. It looked a bit like Pisa, if it had better posture. Four flights of Danish stairs later—likely ranked the happiest stairs in the world just because they get to sit in the happiest country—we reached the landing and crossed the threshold into one of the most European apartments I had ever seen. It took up the entire top floor of the building, which had a slanted roof; the interior was essentially an A-frame hallway with bedrooms jutting out to the sides. The deep wooden beams stuck out from the slanted walls, prompting Jane to hang off of one like a sloth, and me to spend at least forty-five seconds saying ‘*exposed beams*’ in my very best realtor voice. Maria, Sean and I were to share one of the two guest rooms and again my eyebrow danced a jig up my forehead when Sean claimed one of the two beds in the room.

Kathy missed having kids in the house—Maria was one of three—and as she cooked us homemade macaroni and cheese for dinner, she told us how odd it’s been to live alone in a new country. After I insisted we clean up the dishes, the five of us all went to our shared rooms to get ready for bed. No one mentioned anything about the next day’s plan, but no one seemed to care. When I brought it up with Sean and Maria in our room, Maria waved it off and reassured me we’d figure it out in the morning before leaving. Sean griped about something relating to his toiletries. I considered how

I might actually have to lead a group of easy-going, apathetic adult-children and anxiety mounted.

* * *

We all meandered into the kitchen around ten o'clock the next morning, greeted by Kathy with questions of tea or coffee or both, if we were feeling feisty. She had presented an enticing spread of the finest meats and cheeses the corner store had to offer, and included a bevy of flakey pastries from a bakery down the street.

"So," I looked up from my chocolate-crusting breakfast, nervously bouncing my foot underneath the table, "What're we gonna do today?" Nothing. The table started to shake until I was able to will my foot to relax. No one was saying anything of substance, they were just commenting on the food. It wasn't until conversation started to shift to recent assignments and papers from our classes last week that I just gave up and asked Kathy if she had any Copenhagen guidebooks. She rummaged through a storage bin in the living room and came back with multiple options. The rest of the group had fallen silent again as I sprang towards a Lonely Planet guide and began savagely rifling through the pages. I noted the Round Tower as an option to get us going, since it was right around the corner, or the Little Mermaid Statue, since it was further away and we could meander back through the Royal Palace and scope out some hipster neighborhoods for Sean.

“Well? What do you guys think?” I asked again, snapping back into the conversation.

“About what?” Sean honestly wasn’t sure.

“Oh Jesus, Sean,” I exhaled, “About that plan for today? Round Tower, or Little Mermaid?”

“Oh—” Eeyore trailed off. I turned to my watch. We were on hour two of this Planning Debacle, but no one else seemed to care how much time had passed. My foot quivered again so I jumped back into a new guidebook, scouring for some potential solution that would get at least one other person to develop a concrete opinion. I like to think that I’ve made a concerted effort to not turn into my mother. Yet here I was, attempting to find some activity that everyone could enjoy because I was apparently so invested in everyone else’s entertainment, that I couldn’t enjoy myself unless they were all having fun as well. Because, you know, this is vacation. And vacations are relaxing.

“Okay I need to get out and do something,” Jane persisted.

Sean seconded with a battle cry of his own. “Yeah, I don’t wanna be stuck inside all day.”

“Executive decision time?” Ariella looked expectantly at me until I finally spoke over the silence.

“Let’s walk down to the Little Mermaid statue. Of all the stuff I assume we want to see this week, that’s going to be the furthest away, and that just makes the most

logical sense.” I unfurled a map of the city with what I had hoped was a flourish, but nearly ended up ripping the thing in half. Jane chortled. I bit down on the inside of my cheek as to not snap at her.

“We’ll walk down the main canal, see all the pretty buildings, and walk through the Palace.” I got nods from all of them.

We donned coats and scarves, saddled ourselves with downloaded maps on our phones (I did, at least), and clobbered down the happiest stairs and out the happiest door.

“Isn’t it really tiny though?” Sean started talking, as if we’d just interrupted an important conversation he was having with no one.

“What?” We’d made it out the door, but now we had stopped across the street from the apartment.

“The Little Mermaid statue. I dunno,” he shrugged. “Should we still see it if it’s so tiny? Like, wouldn’t a picture suffice?”

I felt like I was about to unravel completely, so I forced a laugh instead.

“Yes, Sean. It is something we should see.”

“Okay, I was just wondering.”

“You’re welcome to do something else, but whatever.” I was half-hoping he’d agree, and branch out to maybe find his coveted sweater, but that was optimistic.

We meandered down the path next to the main canal, passing through pristine groves of trees along the Christianborg Palace. I kept glancing behind me to watch the others. Almost a half an hour past before Sean insisted we stop to take photos of the changing leaves in a small park.

“Wait oh my god, we have to stop,” Ariella agreed. “I need to ‘gram this real quick.” She sifted through her presumed designer shoulder bag and motioned for Maria to help her hold it open while she dug around for her phone.

Jane, who had hooked one hand around a tree trunk and was careening in circles around its roots, chimed in. “*Gram* it?”

“Yeah! Instagram! These trees are super gram-worthy. I’ll just have to time my post so that I can get the maximum number of likes in all time zones, you know?” She took advantage of her assistant still holding open the bag, and took the time to reapply some gloss in a compact mirror before relieving Maria of her duties.

Again, I searched around our group for another pair of eyes with which to commiserate, and Sean was the first to catch my gaze and chuckle. I gained a modicum of appreciation for him. He then whipped out his digital camera, circa 2007, and snapped some close-up photos of leaves remarking on how beautiful the blend of colors were and aren’t trees just the most wonderful things and I checked my watch.

After managing to corral them all back to the main path, and walking for several more minutes, I looked up from my map and pointed out the Little Mermaid Statue just

up ahead. Sean was correct in that it was pretty small. She sat cast in oxidized bronze perched on a boulder that sat up about five feet taller than the rest of the rocky shoreline. We were still on the elevated sidewalk next to the canal, but just up ahead there was a large break in the path, where it dipped into a manmade beach. Rocks crawling with small children and tourists haphazardly lined up to take photos shielded her from our immediate view.

“I don’t see it,” Maria exclaimed.

“Look,” I pointed again towards the several dozen people congregating at the waters’ edge. “Do you see all those people?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, they’re all gathered around the statue.”

We walked down to the throngs of people, with me driving the group onwards until we reached what seemed like an unofficial line for the main photo-op next to the fairytale heroine.

“Hey!” Ariella trotted after me, phone in hand.

“What?”

“Take my photo? I have to have my picture with my namesake!” She held her bag outstretched, this time towards me. I could just strangle her little neck.

“What, *Ariel*?” I winced.

“Yes duh, oh my god. Ariel, Ariella. It’s like the same thing!” The girl spoke in exclamation points. “Just like you and your name!”

“Sure.” I reluctantly held the bag and waited as Ariella copied the Little Mermaid pose on a rock in front of the statue. *Just like my name?* I’m named after Wendy Moira Angela Darling, from J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. In Hebrew, Ariella means ‘lioness of God.’ Not the Hans Christian Andersen mermaid. My desire for everyone to have fun in Copenhagen was suddenly cut with resentment and possession of fairytales that shaped my entire childhood. I could just leave. I never planned this trip in the first place; I just weaseled my way in because I had nothing else to do, and somehow managed to create a sense of responsibility to these apathetic assholes. I could just leave and go to a museum and stroll around and maybe get lost for a while, but I was still holding Ariella’s phone, and going up to give it back to her would lead to an explanation as to my leaving and I just didn’t have the energy.

Instead I smiled faintly and took the photo, making sure to focus on one of the many gulls in the water behind her. Sean, Jane and Maria, perched on a nearby rock, quietly observed the exchange. After giving Ariella back her phone, I stepped back on the stacks of small boulders to get a better look at the mermaid. She was lounging wistfully, cast eternally in bronze that had been rubbed to a shimmering golden on her tail and on her breasts—because people are disgusting no matter where you are. She sat on her side, tail drooping down the small boulder, staring off into the distance;

delicate in her complacency. I was starting to feel calm, like I could exhale without it sounding like an exasperated sigh.

“Um, Moira?”

“Yes, Sean?”

“We’re thinking of walking back down through that one neighborhood Kathy recommended,” he sounded like a caricature of himself.

“Sure, I’ll pull up a map,” I reached for my phone and plotted our next move.

The walk took us back through the Palace, but this time we walked up several blocks before turning back in the direction of Kongens Nytorv—the main drag of typically colorful buildings and restaurants and various waffles on sticks—and in the direction of the apartment. I enjoy walking at a decent pace, which usually entails keeping a brisk clip down the sidewalk. Apparently, my definition differed from the rest of my tour group’s. I had noted several possible vintage shops to quiet Sean’s incessant whining about a ‘dad sweater,’ and we were nearing the first one. I was, as I like to put it, walking with a purpose, when I glanced back to what I thought was the rest of the group and found nothing but vacantly happy, smirking Danes. I pulled over to the side of the sidewalk and waited as they made up the block and a half between us. They joined me after a solid minute, and I kept charging ahead.

I heard snickers behind me as we rounded a corner and landed in front of the first vintage shop.

“What’s so funny?” I regretted asking.

“Well,” Sean spoke up first, which was rare for him, “you walk really fast.”

“Yes, Sean. Yes I do.”

“It’s just funny, cause we keep losing you,” he continued. “So we came up with a little way to spot you in a crowd.”

“And how do you do that?”

“Well,” he looked to Ariella, who picked up the thought.

“Well we just look for the remotely Scandinavian-looking girl in the pink hair-tie, walking too fast, and go from there!”

“You guys think I look Scandinavian?” I was flattered. I’d spent so much time staring bleakly at the four of them that I’d nearly forgotten the stereotypical image of the Danes I held in my mind.

“Yea!” Maria chirped, “You’re tall, you wear all-black, and you’re decently blonde!”

We meandered through the small shop, its walls teamed with flannels of every variety and denim in shades I never knew existed. Two circular racks knelt under the weight of scores of horrifying wool sweaters. I flipped through the flannels while Jane flipped out over a bin of bandannas, and Ariella forced Maria to try on the Worst of the 80s as found in the dress racks. I slid my eyes towards Sean, who was burying himself amidst wool.

Sean finally plodded over to a dressing room and tried on a few sweaters, all in slight varieties of the same muted knit geometrical patterns. No Dane I'd seen wore sweaters like those. He had tried to describe his goal Scandinavian style to me earlier in the day, and I could tell he was trying desperately not to use any descriptors that alluded to Bill Cosby, so instead kept saying the phrase 'underrated sitcom type pattern.' I was sure this was it. He'd try them on, pick the tackiest one, and we'd get out of here and walk to the Round Tower.

"None of these are right," he mumbled. Excellent.

I looked down at my nails and little stubs looked happily back at me. Taunting me, making sure I knew that my high stress levels do in fact show, regardless of how I attempt to cover them up. Of course the sweaters weren't right, by no means did they match with the sleek streamlined style of the locals we saw walking around that day. Then again, the only vision of Danish men I had was of tall blonde, bearded men in black pea coats whirring by on bicycles. I hadn't gotten a good enough look at this alleged Scandinavian style because I'd focused all my attention on getting to the next sight without losing anyone.

"Where to now?" Jane asked. The five of us had congregated outside the door and one by one they looked to me. I'd been crowned the leader.

"Round Tower." I didn't bother asking, I just took off down the sidewalk, resentful of my newly assigned role

Jane, nearly out of breath, caught up next to me, half-laughing, "What's up?" I asked her.

"Oh, we were having a race to see who could catch up to you first!"

Of course they were.

"Why are you walking so fast?"

"Because it's nearly 4, and the Round Tower closes at 5. And I'm not even walking fast," I explained, "This is how you're supposed to walk in any city, you gotta bob and weave."

She and I hopped through the hoards of Scandinavians, checking back every so often to make sure the remaining trio was still following dutifully.

"Hey! Slow down!" I heard a voice peep after me and Jane and I slowed to a glacial stroll as the remaining three caught up.

"Jeez," Sean wheezed. "Relax, Mom."

My eyebrow shot up past my forehead and felt like it was about to fall off.

"Mom?" I was laughing, because I'm a good person, but this stung. I truly forgot why I cared so much. He was completely right, again. I had stepped into the 'mom' role, which was especially strange since we were staying with and spending time with Kathy, an actual mother. I needed a waffle.

* * *

The following days were largely similar. We'd spend a lovely hour or so sitting in the apartment where Ariella would rarely look up from her makeup bag to complain about how we just needed to go to this bar her older sister raved about. I would remind her that it's still before noon. Maria, ever the optimist, would suggest various things to do that incorporated everyone's goals for the trip. Jane tapped her foot, complaining that we really needed to get out of the house.

Sean made sure we all remembered he still hadn't found his sweater, and that needed to be on our list of things to do on any given day.

The last day we were there, the rest of the group trooped downstairs to get a pastry next door. It was well after lunch, and we had not determined what we were going to do. I stayed to help Kathy clean up the kitchen from last night's dinner.

Kathy handed me a plate to dry, "You seem a bit stressed out."

I put away the plate, reached for another, and laughed.

"They really look to you, you know," she continued. "It's quite admirable. You're doing so much for them, really making sure they're having fun."

I agreed with her, and told her I felt obligated to do so, since I was never asked to join the trip in the first place.

“It’s the Jewish guilt,” I stammered. Kathy laughed. Whenever I had the time, I made it a point to teach her some Yiddish phrases—she was in the process of converting to Judaism, and Hebrew school only does so much.

The others burst through the door before I could thank her for her kind words.

“Okay what are we doing tonight?” Ariella looked to me. I might as well run with it, since this was looking like the only way I’d survive the rest of the week.

“Let’s go to Tivoli,” I said. It’s one of the oldest theme parks in the world, an absolute must-do, according to Lonely Planet.” Maybe if I cited my sources, Sean would come around and make an actual decision.

“Eh,” instead he was continually apathetic, “I don’t really like that Disneyland stuff, plus, I haven’t—“

“Found your sweater, we know.” Jane cut him off.

“Guys, we’re here. Its only similarity with Disneyland is that it’s an amusement park, that’s it. We need to go,” I pleaded. “We can go wander around, or maybe go to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek museum and shop a bit, and then all go over to Tivoli.”

“Well,” Kathy chimed in, “You guys don’t have to stay together. I would love some time with Maria, and I know Sean wanted to shop. Why don’t we all meet back here at 5:30?” She looked at me and smiled.

I was the first out the door, happily leaping down the happiest stairs in the world.

I had just under an hour before the museum closed. Right across the street from Tivoli Gardens, it stood guarded by white columns and flanked by two marble lions stretching on cold stone platforms. The museum was built to house the private collection of the Carlsberg family, whose two passions included art and beer. I loped around the museum. I didn't have to check over my shoulder, I didn't have to wave off the maternal insults, and I didn't have to compromise. I was completely alone to pass judgments on museumgoers.

Finally able to study faces other than those of my American friends, I selected a bench in the middle of the covered statue garden in the main museum hall. I examined the perpetual smirks of locals out on dates or just ending days spent with their families. The blonde-blue-eyed looks shared between them all weren't smug or disdainful, just appreciative. I had quietly assumed they would be outwardly and eerily smiley all the time, but they weren't. They were just content. It finally began to chip away at my determined scowl brought on by my travel companions

Snaking my way through rooms of Middle Eastern art and Dutch masters, I came to an exhibit on Degas and his sculptures. Spending twenty minutes in a room alone, staring at the intricacies in the pointed toe of *The Little Dancer* encased in bronze and wax didn't bring about any revelations, save for a bizarre image in my head of this *Little Dancer* placed on a boulder facing the Little Mermaid statue, the two bronzed-cased faces vacantly staring at each other with glimmers of recognition like two estranged

Copenhagen sisters. After several minutes of uninterrupted silence, Xanax Eeyore's whimpers started to echo in my ear. My hour was up and I purpose-walked to Kathy's apartment.

A mere ten minutes later and I was the first back up the happiest stairs. Kathy made a pot of tea while she and Maria told me of their fruitless quest to find a cat café, and I told them about my bold solo journey to the art museum. We had just begun to formulate a game plan for Tivoli when the others arrived with shopping bags in tow.

"Oh, goodness!" Kathy exclaimed, "What did you kids find?"

"Please, please tell me you found a sweater," I cut in.

Ariella looked to Sean and laughed knowingly, in a very sit-com fashion, "He found a sweater, alright!"

Sean's perpetually sheepish facial features turned upwards into a smirk. He lowered his eyes towards a crumpled H&M shopping bag and sifted through the contents.

"I went to H&M."

"You're kidding," I was floored. After all the griping about finding something uniquely Scandinavian, he ended up buying not one, but two sweaters from a massive, chain retail store.

"I recognize the irony, yes," he bobbed his head.

"Do you?" I was unconvinced.

"Yes, it's fine."

"It is not fine! We spent hours inside thrift stores!" My voice reached dog whistle decibels. A gently glance from Kathy pulled it back down.

"Okay kids, I could use a beer. Why don't we all walk over to Tivoli?" I calmed down and was immediately back to suggesting fun things for the group to do.

Off The Map

nonfiction

Maps of Bath stop after the Royal Crescent—a stretch of balanced beige Georgian row houses that arch their backs into the shape of a crescent moon. The front portions of the houses, those most pristine in their beigeness, are open for public viewing with a sprawling lawns tenderly placed at their feet. Beyond the Crescent, the same beige houses spring from poorly paved roads up San-Francisco-steep hills. One street—Northampton Street—sneaks up from the Crescent and just past the boundaries of the tourist maps. Those branching streets of beige, those are the places where you can find the quiet from the tour groups and bumbling coaches.

The city itself has layers. From the Romans who built the baths in 60 AD, to Medieval walls and abbeys in the 7th century, to Georgian-era row houses, Bath huddles in between Cotswold hills in Somerset county, England. After its beige had been left to accumulate layers of black soot, the town dusted itself off in the mid-1960s and was reborn as a destination for city-dwellers looking for a luxurious spa getaway. The city's Roman and Georgian layers become destinations, giving way to coaches swollen with tourists looking to walk the city's endless hills for views of the Royal Crescent and Roman Baths. You have to work to find Bath relaxing.

Near each new attraction you happen upon, a short pillar with a walking map of Bath greets you like a friendly mall directory you can never seem to find when you

need it most. They begin by marking the Bath Abbey in the city centre, and then they turn their focus upwards. They dot the hills I traipse up and down each day to get to classes for my study abroad program. Along the way, the maps mark The Roman Baths and Pump Room, and The Fashion Museum, until they reach the Crescent and Circus at the top of a series of small hills. And then they stop. There is no Northampton Street on these maps. The street that I, along with eight of my friends, lived on for four months drops off the map. It's better that way.

The land surrounding what is now Northampton Street changed hands several times from one wealthy landowner to the next in a classic tale of persistent development. The land itself was bought from Bath Abbey and, steadily over a decade in the latter 18th-century was built up in the Georgian style. The neighborhood was a simple development, with housing intended for the upper-middle class, even the families of the architects and developers. Each house looked remarkably similar, save for distinguishing fanlights and doorframes; the first ones to be built were at the wider base of the street, then it wasn't another twenty years until work continued up the hill.

In past visions of studying abroad, I saw myself frolicking around London, or brooding moodily under sunken bookshelves in the libraries of Oxford. I knew very little of Bath. I selected the program because it was small and specialized; because I knew of a few students who had come back from Bath transformed by the people and by the city. My first day in Bath in late August was the tenth circle of hell. Yes the

program was small, but maybe it was too small. It was highly specialized, but maybe I would get bored. Then I walked around.

Well into the first week of classes, the nine of us became a 'we' — a cohesive unit. We were now accustomed to forging through the hills and over the River Avon, beyond the mall-directory maps of Bath to reach Northampton each night. Each evening we laughed loudly, bleary-eyed and skipping up hills to 29 Northampton Street, where we had created home. As soon as you pried open the door you were back in the States.

But the maps think that our street isn't good enough. They think that, once you pass the Royal Crescent, there's nothing for you and why would you dare climb any higher; it's just more beige.

It's wonderful how wrong the maps are. Leaving the front door of 29 and turning left, a small park lounges at the base of the hill. It's a triangular parcel of land with three benches—one on each side—it's eerie. Before 1942 St. Andrews Church stood on that small parcel, its broach spire was the tallest in Bath at 240 feet, until the church was leveled in the Bath Blitz. Instead of rebuilding in the same spot, reconstruction was moved one block over on Julian Road, as to not be disruptive to the view of the skyline. Properties at the base of the street, across from the church, and at the top of the hill were leveled; thus, 29 only faced some severe scarring, its bones still stood.

At the base of Northampton Street just where the street intersects Julian Road, the monumental damage done over the course of two nights of bombing is compacted into one small memento. A battered tin sign clings to a lamppost, directing citizens towards the nearest air raid shelter up the hill towards the Landsdown Crescent. Half of the historical buildings lining this street were reduced to heaps of historical rubble when incendiaries tore through. They had to be rebuilt in the aftermath of the war. Los Angeles—my hometown—would have built something bigger, better, more modern. But Bath recreated consistency in perfectly updated, neutral-toned replicas of the Georgian Era.

At the widened base of the street lounges an apartment complex called Phoenix House. It was aptly named such because it was built after the war, and quite literally rose from the ashes with the original intent of becoming a shopping center and tying Northampton Street back to its Restoration-era roots of being home to merchants who ran the storefront on the ground floor and lived upstairs. Our respite from the immersion, our constructed quiet, was dangerously close to ending up on the maps.

Bath has magic to it because of that beigeness. The buildings aren't ordinary, they're stoic. Not just the replicated ones at the end of my often-ignored street, but all the houses lining the Crescent, the Circus, and all of the proudly beige residences.

They're consistent. They're furiously sleeping, colorless beige ideas¹ that you can imprint yourself onto until you've made the city yours in a wildly short amount of time.

It's a place you feel you must go back to, because it's a place where bits and bobs of your heart are scattered on the streets left off of the map.

¹ Inspired by a sentence from Noam Chomsky's 1957 book, *Syntactic Structures*: 'colorless green ideas sleep furiously.'

A Picture of Dorian: The Pub Quizzes of Britain and Ireland

nonfiction

I

Britain

We sucked. We were collectively awful at these pub quizzes. Each week, around five of us would go to the Bath Brew House to compete for glory, and have a few pints of truly wonderful beer. We would come up with a different team name, each one worse than the last. Our first week there, we were the American Idiots, and it just went immediately down hill. There were four of us who would attend the Brew House weekly quiz each Tuesday: Tina, Collin, Valerie, and myself.

While The Raven remains top notch for eating and drinking, and Rev's and Po's tie for those inevitable nights where you want to be trash, the Bath Brew House will forever be my favorite pub in Bath. Yes, their selection of craft brews on tap is astounding, and yes, their food is shit. But every Tuesday evening at 7 pm, the Bath Brew House welcomes the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses for a pub quiz.

After dinner around 6:45, we would traipse down the hill from our flat on Northampton Street to go into the city centre. The quiz started promptly at 7:30, but in order to get a good table we would always get there at least a half-hour early.

To a local, a pub quiz is just another weekly activity you attend with a few mates. They're a supremely standard way to pass two hours on a weekday, mostly because

they've been an intrinsic part of pub culture since the seventies. In the mid-seventies, two Brits, Sharon Burns and Tom Porter, travelled across southern England bringing their new format of pub trivia played by teams of pub-dwellers as a means to increase a pub's mid-week revenue, when business would otherwise be slow. There have been actual studies done on pub quizzes in the United Kingdom. After several Wikipedia wormholes and deep dives into obscure websites for pub quiz fanatics, I read one study conducted in 2009 where they found nearly 23,000 pubs across Britain run a quiz, that number obviously much larger seven years later. Bath, however, is special. One swift Google search for 'pub quizzes Bath' and nearly every single pub's website comes up with some mention of their extra special weekly quiz. Certain groups of people will prefer certain quizzes, ones that have a shorter format and are taken less seriously. Hoards of uni freshers, for instance, lean towards the quizzes put on in the student center pub, simply because the questions are easy and the beer is cheap. Those are the groups that have inexperienced quizmasters who emcee the event, usually fellow classmates, or at other pubs, just another bartender who's not that into it. Such groups will develop very strong opinions about certain trivia nights; the one at The Royal Oak on Pulteney Road just across the river, for instance, is shit.

Surrounded by locals fresh off a day at work and still in business-casual, and some errant groups of uni students and gaggles of lads, we stuck out. We were the ones I'd made fun of in other pubs around England, and at other quizzes in Ireland. I had

viciously mocked a group that had to be from Middle America. With one (or more) colorful knit cardigan shoved desperately into their perfect-for-overhead-bin suitcase, they adorably thought Temple Bar was the height of genuine Irish culture, because one city block with hoards of drunken tourists is obviously the most genuinely Irish place in Dublin. I laughed when they thought they could beat me to a quiz answer about which sport Oscar Wilde played at university (he was an accomplished boxer). But there we sat on painted picnic tables in a large heated tent jutting off the back of the Bath Brew House, a pint in one hand and a pencil nub in the other, clamoring over the line on the quiz answer sheet that listed 'Team Name.' We tried to come up with something clever, and landed on American Idiots because we wanted a name we could live up to. A group sitting at the table next to us called themselves "Let's Get Quizzical," and one larger team just flat out went for it with "Quizzed In My Pants."

* * *

Pubs are not bars. Bars are an American term, and are therefore looked down upon by the British pub-frequenting crowd. Bars imply dancing, while if you try to dance at a pub you're either so blazingly drunk that you're alone but your double-vision is keeping you company, or you're an obnoxious attendee of a stag party or a hen-do (bachelor or bachelorette party). Either way, you might get thrown out.

Bath's pubs like to brag about themselves, and usually they're not worth the hype. There's the "world's smallest pub," and the pub with the "best pies." There's

bound to be a pub smaller than one in Bath, England, but they won't tell you where it is. But The Raven does have amazing meat pies. For nine quid, a lithe-limbed girl just out of university will bring a bowl warmed with a delicately intimidating game pie. The pie options are enticingly British: venison and streaky bacon, chicken and squab, and the ever-classic steak and ale prepared with in-house stout. Each pie rests on a bed of mash and it takes a great amount of self-control not to curl up next to it. The Raven actually pays attention to its menu as much as it pays attention to its brews. This is not the case in most pubs. Standard pub fare is greasy and, to an American palate, tasteless. The British pub interpretation of wings is three very small chicken wings, doused in a sauce that looks like buffalo sauce but tastes like hotel maple syrup, and rolled in crushed tortilla chips. Those wings are only eaten out of necessity: if I wanted to continue drinking without embarrassing myself in front of locals with astronomically high alcohol tolerances, I needed to eat some food. The one similarity between British pub and American bar fare is that the food is all overpriced.

Pub culture is homely; it's where you go on a weeknight to rationalize actually going out to drink during the week.

You're going out? But it's Wednesday, mate.

Ah yeah but I'm just going to the pub.

Alright then, totally fine.

Returning home one evening, a friend and I oohed and aahed at the quintessential Britishness of The Raven. The dark wooden panels that crept halfway up white-plastered walls were probably over a hundred years old, and the odd mix of locals and tourists who heard of the pub's fabled pies crowd the bar and surrounding booths. We lingered on the pub sign, and the logo stamped on the pint glasses. The logo of the pub swings from a red pub sign outside, depicting a fancy raven eyeing the pedestrians walking below. Wearing a tailored red coat and black trousers complete with silver-buckle shoes, he lifts a top hat in one wing and holds a walking stick in the other. He's the picture of sophisticated mirth. My friend agreed, and took our raving further when she revealed she stole one of the pint glasses months ago. Apparently for those with an iffy moral compass, stealing pint glasses from different pubs is commonplace and close to expected amongst visiting American students. She's swiped a pint glass from each pub she frequented in Bath. I went back to The Raven the next night for a pint of Raven Ale, and to steal the pint glass. I now use it to hold pens, which feels too academic for a pint glass.

The Bath Brew House on James Street looks fairly modern, sticking out from other Bath pubs that are almost always described as some level of 'quaint' and 'creaky.' It's on the edge of the city centre, across from Green Park Station, a complex that houses a large Sainsbury's and the farmer's market on the weekends. It's not like The Raven, where it easily picks up tourist foot traffic; nor is it a hole-in-the-wall. It's modest

enough to be slightly on yet slightly off the beaten path. But the Brew House is geared to the large group of working twenty and thirty-somethings who all feel a need to prove they're using their degree in their current career through a pretentious pub quiz. Instead of a rickety swinging sign, 'The Bath Brew House' is painted on the side of the olive-green building in big type. Immediately as you walk in, there are stubby tables with stools that look like mushrooms, where you can sit with your circle of other obnoxiously educated friends and play one of the many board games the Brew House offers. We beeline for the long bar, sporting around thirty different brews on tap—several of which are the Brew House's own microbrews, as it is a functioning brewery. It's your very own slice of Brooklyn abroad.

* * *

The quiz itself takes place in the beer garden, which isn't so much of a beer garden as it is a large patio with colorful picnic tables under a large white tent. To participate in the quiz, you can have a group of 8 people maximum, and each person pays 1 pound. The winning group gets that money as a prize, the losing group gets a gag gift, and the second-to-last group gets to decide the topic of one section of the following week's quiz. There are 6 sections, one of which is all about music: the quizmaster will play the first 30 seconds of a song and you have to guess correctly.

The quizmaster at the Brew House was a large part of what made this a religious experience. Like a stoic preacher, Dorian stood before us, microphone in one hand and

quiz in the other, clad in a leopard print button-down bowling shirt. He had long mousebrown hair that swept carelessly below his shoulder blades, and small wire-rimmed glasses hopped up and down his nose when he spoke. He sported a very shy sort of beard and mustache combination that we grew to love. Each week we eagerly awaited the new shirt that would grace Dorian's shoulders, going so far as to place meaningless bets on whether or not he would wear the leopard print, or the bright pink twice in a row. We sucked at those bets, too. Dorian was too enigmatic to pin down. I tried recently, going so far as to find him on multiple social media accounts, and when I did, I got so excited because he looks exactly the same as he did a year ago. He even wears the same leopard shirt.

I'm not really sure where the quizmasters come from. They just appear, take the microphone, and start in on a barrage of questions to make you feel either very accomplished or very inadequate. From a haze of brightly patterned button-downs and an intensely aggravating knowledge of semi-useless trivia, Dorian descended unto us that first fateful Tuesday in September. According to social media (I have obviously found him on Facebook), he was a Bath Uni student looking for a new way to pass time. Thus volunteering to run the weekly pub quiz. But to our group, he was everything. His British apathy and his shirts were his trademarks. He was the type of person that could easily be mocked, but mocking him would just make you look like an ass because he was just that cool.

One rowdy bunch of mates tried one week, and when Dorian was calling out the scores and the winning team names at the end of the night, one group identified themselves as “A Picture of Dorian’s Gay.” A painful noise tore through the tent, met only by Dorian’s light scoff and quip of how vastly unoriginal they were. Days later, Collin told the rest of us that he had seen Dorian walking just blocks away from our house. We didn’t believe him. Just the thought of seeing Dorian out of the context of the Brew House felt wrong. We wouldn’t leave Collin alone until he told us what shirt he was wearing, only then would we know he was telling the truth.

We were out of our element when the first section called ‘General Knowledge’ opened up with a question about the buoyancy of whale blubber. Thanks to the small pockets of random facts each of us had somehow accumulated, we scraped through the General Knowledge round, and then the Science round before landing on the Music round.

I consider myself a fairly musical person. I grew up in Los Angeles with a hum-head father and a reformed-groupie mother; CSNY was my first concert when I was seven-years-old, and the opening chords to *Hannah Jane* by Hootie & The Blowfish would magically silence my infant temper tantrums—my taste has since matured.

The music round began with a nondescript Adele song, then the ‘Winter’ suite of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. Then the chord strike of *Summer of ’69* crams its way through the speakers and I start yelling because *I know this song*. I know this song because it would

always play on the radio in the morning when my dad would drive me to the bus stop for school. I know this song because I remember giggling when I found out that there was no way Bryan Adams was a Danny Zuko-esque stud in 1969, and that this song truly was a three-minute innuendo.

“Guys, guys we all know this song,” I pleaded with a table of partially blank faces. One or two people nodded. I was desperately trying to play a game of word association in my head: crude song, 80s, close to a one-hit-wonder, probably Canadian. I’d heard this song on every allegedly oldies hit radio station in California. I kept scrounging for clues.

“Are we sure it’s not Bruce Springsteen?” one genius friend of mine postulated.

“We’re very, very sure.”

Dorian gives a fifteen-minute break in between the third and fourth section where you can stretch your legs, roam freely about the pub, and get another pint. I spent that break going through a mental Rolodex of 80s male artists until finally I arrived at the greatest moment of instant relief I’ve ever known.

“BRYANADAMS,” I nearly scream across the table to my poor friend Collin, who had just returned with his third pint. “It’s Bryan Adams.”

“What question are you answering?”

“The song, *Summer of ’69*,” I was out of breath for some reason, “it’s by Bryan Adams.”

He asked me if I was sure, and I almost cried.

“Because if you’re not sure, I’m just telling you now, you may have given the answer away to seven other people sitting around us,” he cautioned. I didn’t care. I may have just broken the record for the person most irrelevantly excited about Bryan Adams since 1991.

The answer was in fact correct, but we still came in close-to-last that night.

* * *

The puns, the beer, and the trivia lent itself to the best type of obscure nightlife Britain has to offer. We did try the other options, however, and went to the clubs.

The clubs are drastically different. British culture tends to brag about its clubs, which are strikingly similar to American club culture, if that culture catered strictly to university students instead of fully grown dudes in marketing. For a city as old as Bath, it has a surprising amount of club culture, in that it has more than one club. During one Saturday night, a group of my American study-abroad friends and I elected to go to Po Na Na to get a dose of the Eurotrash scene we’d heard so much about. Po’s is a Moroccan-themed nightclub, which already sent alarm bells ringing in my head. It’s underground, and part of the property runs beneath Admiral Lord Nelson’s historic home on Pierrepoint Street. A fact I’m sure would not interest the people who frequent Po’s.

After having our flashy America driver's licenses checked more than once and paying an obscene cover charge, we descend into Po's and I immediately can't breathe. The generic off-brand cologne, the churning sea of tight v-necks, and the fake fog replacing any breathable air in the small arched rooms made dancing an athletic feat. We leave after a respectable hour and find a street meat truck, buy cheeseburgers, and are home by 2 am.

The other notable club called Revolution—Rev's for short—airs on the side of an uppity American bar, unless it's Fresher's Week—think college orientation in a city-based university where the drinking age is eighteen, and remove any semblance of academic activity. A few weeks after the Po Na Na excursion, this same group elects to sign up for the Big Bath Bar Crawl. The crawl stops at a few nondescript pubs like an Irish pub called Molloy's, which were nondescript only because when you pre-game a bar crawl with seven shots of gin, discerning pub décor doesn't become a priority. The one gleaming thing about Rev's is their limbo stick. It's a very long piece of wood with shot-glass-sized holes carved into it, and two patriotically lit firecrackers stuck in each side. The rules are pure: limbo under the flaming shot holder, and you get a free shot. Once the limbo stick is all out of shots, the game is over. Since they were all free shots, the club wasn't about to fill them with nice liquor. Each glass was teeming with Pepto-Bismol pink cotton candy or cupcake or vanilla flavored vodka. Rev's is the last stop on the crawl before we give in at nearly 5 am. I think Rev's was the last stop, I don't

entirely remember. Again, location was not on my priority list after the flaming limbo cupcake shots. The next morning we all agree to go back to the Brew House that Thursday.

* * *

After the Music section of the quiz, there's a fifteen-minute break to get refills before reconvening for the last three rounds: History, Entertainment, and then the Specialist round. For the Specialist round, the team that comes in second-to-last gets to pick the topic for that round for the following week. The one week I missed the quiz, our American faction came in second-to-last. Being crafty, they chose the American Civil War for the sixth category next week. This wasn't a huge upset in our rumored winning streak because we didn't have a winning streak. We always ended up in the bottom five teams out of several dozen groups of Brits. We were never bitter about it, but there was one group that won consistently. They were a very humble looking trio of men in crew-neck sweaters in subdued colors. They didn't have a snappy team name, they didn't scream the names of one-hit-wonders across picnic tables, and they always won. No matter how hard we tried, we could never beat them. We only really made valiant attempts in the first few weeks. We had a system that involved delicate timing of cooking dinner and finishing any leftover work before the early evening.

At 6:45, Valerie, Tina, Collin and I all skip down the hill towards the Brew House. I have a theory that you have to be a little weird to really love Bath. Tina

embodies that theory. She's a Chicago native with heaps of curly brown hair and the middle child of five sisters. Her family is apparently the March Sisters of golf; they all play in some capacity, and Tina plays on her college team. From talking to her for several minutes, you would be hard-pressed to find an indication of any sorority behavior, unless you ask. Once you do, she doesn't shut up about sisterhood and anchors and bid day. However, she will soon undoubtedly slip in her love for Tolkien and Lord of the Rings. You have to be a little weird.

The quiz was off to the familiarly rocky start. By the break, we knew we hadn't a chance of making the top three (we never did), so we got our second (third) pint and gathered back around the table for Dorian to start calling the last of the entertainment round.

"In *Thunderbirds*, what is the full name of Lady Penelope's butler and chauffeur?"

Dorian asked the room.

We wrote in 'Steve.' Absolutely no idea.

Dorian continued. "The phrase 'bunny boiler,' referring to a woman who is emotionally unstable and vengeful as a result of being spurned, originates from a scene in which 1987 film?"

"*Fatal Attraction*," I leaned in and made sure to whisper this time.

"Are you sure?" More doubt from Collin.

"Yes I'm sure, just write it down," I hissed.

Collin is nearly Napoleonic in his personality. One of two seniors abroad for the Fall semester, his humor aligned with mine to a tee. He was never in a fraternity, but he might as well have been, simply due to the fact that he's 5'10" and one of the best future potential hedge fund managers I've met. He just has that air of superiority about him, to the extent that even a lowly game of Scrabble played in a crummy Airbnb condo in Weymouth takes on international importance.

Dorian asked a few more nondescript questions about Radio 4 theme songs, and other vague British sitcoms before concluding the round. Coincidentally, one of my closest friends from school was visiting me that week. Catherine was on her fall break from her program in Menton, France, and stopped in Bath en route to London.

Catherine is an International Relations and Political Science major at Wellesley, and the daughter of lawyers. I would stop the description there, but she's also from Colorado. She loves to talk about hiking and about Colorado, and she loves to argue—though she will insist that it's not arguing, merely speaking passionately about one subject.

Between her—a gaping history buff—and Collin, a history major, our team was fairly confident entering the final specialist round on the American Civil War.

“In 1860, which was the first state of eleven to secede from the Union?”

Much to Catherine's dismay, Collin grabbed the pencil stub first and scribbled 'South Carolina' in the answer line.

“Which modern day US state capital was also the capital of the Confederacy for the majority of the American Civil War?”

Catherine leapt to the pencil while Collin said knowingly, “it’s Richmond—”

Dorian cut through our triumph once more. “And for a bonus point, which was the original Confederate capital?”

We stared at each other in desperate silence.

“It’s gotta be in Alabama,” Catherine added.

“Screw it, I’m writing in Montgomery.” Collin scrawled intently as Dorian began the next question.

“Which battle of the 1st-3rd of July 1863, at which Union general George Meade defeated invading Confederate forces led by Robert E. Lee, was the bloodiest battle of the entire American Civil War with an estimated 50,000 casualties?”

I overheard one team of lads scoff and guess Battle of the Bulge.

“It’s not Antietam, that was in September 1862,” I chirped and Tina turned to me, surprised.

“I love the Civil War. It’s my favorite war,” I calmly replied.

“Ok you have a favorite war?” Tina laughed before Catherine spoke up in her strident and emphatic voice.

“Mine’s World War One,” she said.

Tina looked at both of us and marveled. Val sat content and nurtured her pint of cider. Valerie is one of those rarely gentle souls; one who wears glasses and reads for pleasure, and who unintentionally makes you feel guilty about your 9-hour Netflix binge because she's gotten so much done in one afternoon. She looks calmly composed. She wears a standard outfit on rotation of cuffed jeans, a solid colored t-shirt, Keds, and a navy blue jacket, and has the collarbones of a dancing gazelle. Apparently I was not the first one to lightly tease her for the way that she walks: delicately and half on tiptoe.

"Ok shut up, it's not Antietam, it's Gettysburg." Collin took the answer sheet again just as Dorian brushed his silken hair back behind his shoulder and lifted the microphone for the next question.

"By what one-word nickname was Confederate general Thomas Jackson more commonly known?" He wasn't as invested in this as we were. He looked out, bemused, over the sea of intoxicated idiots trying too hard and his eyes seemed to sparkle.

"Stonewall Jackson," we all whispered in fierce unison. We could taste mediocrity at long last, and it tasted better than flaming Pepto shots. We were so close to coming in just below average and we wanted it. Dorian launched into the final question of the round, and of the quiz.

"Which Confederate ship fired the last shot of the American Civil War when it attacked a fleeing whaling ship off the coast of Alaska on June 22nd, 1865?"

Shit. We stared at each other. Val downed the last of her cider, and a collective laughter of disbelief erupted from the tent.

Catherine and Collin began plotting battles and timelines and all I could think of was this tune of a song I sang in my high school choir. It was so familiar; it pulled on memories from eighth grade US history, memories from my uncharacteristic childhood obsession with the Civil War. I started humming, turning over piles of clutter in the corners of my brain searching for the name of this one damn song. Catherine heard me and stopped talking.

“What’s the name of this song?” I asked her, hoping out collective choral knowledge would conjure an answer.

I kept humming, growing more and more desperate.

“It’s something about Virginia, right?” Catherine whipped her eyes to Collin, then to Tina, then to Val. “Or Missouri?”

I hummed the same bit of the tune again.

“What the hell does it matter?” Collin was frustrated; he wanted to do just as perfectly okay as we did, but we were taking too long. “Is the answer somehow rooted in the name of this stupid song?”

“Yes,” I stopped humming to glare at him, “I remember in middle school, my teacher played us this song to close our unit on the Civil War cause it was the name of

this damn boat or the name of something else. It was all very hippie-dippie, we also sang it in choir that year, but I can't remember—“

“SHENANDOAH,” Catherine nearly yelled and I have never felt such a rush of relief.

“Are you sure,” Tina asked.

We answered in unison, and Tina wrote out the name of the damn boat. Dorian collected everyone's answer sheets, and after an agonizing fifteen minutes of tallying up scores, he returned with the microphone.

We came in sixteenth out of just about thirty teams. At last, we were gloriously below average.

II

Ireland

I held this quiz in my head when I journeyed to Dublin for a weekend study trip. This was the main reason I elected to take this particular Irish Literature course: a weekend in Dublin, talking about books and drinking with my tutors. We were told stories of dizzying pubs and rowdy singing along the Temple Bar—arguably the more infamous of Dublin locales, a street congested with pubs and tourists; the ear-to-ear grins of students first encountering the Trinity College library, and culminating in the revelatory literary pub-crawl. “Our group has never lost the pub crawl,” Andrew

Butterworth—an administrator of the study abroad program—said in hushed tones. His beaming blue eyes darted around the group. He had a wizened, anthropomorphic face and cloudy white hair. His glinting personality paralleled some sort of spirit guide; maybe the kind you’d find in an old adventure novel, there to guide the protagonist on some quest with gentle quips and expert use of Cockney rhyming slang. We carefully asked how you could possibly lose a pub-crawl, as the sole objective is to get as drunk in as many different pubs as possible. “Ah yes, but there is a twist,” his eyes shone like diamonds as his voice lifted for emphasis. “After the crawl, after you’re all nice and *happy*, there is a quiz,” he sparkled again.

Nowadays, it’s difficult to recognize Dublin by the grit that once captivated its writers in the early twentieth century. Our tutor, Jo, had cautioned us on the first day of class: “Irish writers are all dead white blokes,” she said. “You’ll see that in class, and especially in Dublin.” Her Somerset accent evened out the edges on the vowel sounds, turning the ‘o’ into a soft ‘ow’ and made for easy listening. She wore her lobbed off brown hair tucked around her ears, brushing her shoulders, which were clad in a tomato-red cardigan. She continued to remind us of portrayals of the city in the texts we had read the previous months. This group already had an immense leg up from the quizzes of the Brew House. We weren’t going in blind, and we actually allegedly knew things.

Joyce (Dead White Bloke #1) used its deep alleyways behind to capture the Dubliners in paralysis. Beckett (Dead White Bloke #2) decided to focus on outside the city roads while two men actively do nothing, in two acts. Now the city teems with loudness and light. Along the Temple Bar, music oozes onto cobblestoned streets; your ears latch onto the nearest melody and hold on for dear life until another tune cuts in and you keep swinging and swinging like a child on monkey bars. The city is characterized by joy.

After a rushed meal of red curry and rice at a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant on Duke Street, the six of us met Jo and Andrew just down the road at the door to The Duke, the first stop on the crawl. Most pubs in Dublin claim to be the oldest, and The Duke is no exception. It's stood on the corner of Duke Street and Duke Lane Upper since 1822, and retains its Victorian façade from the later half of the nineteenth century. In a small room off the main bar with dark wood paneling and cushioned stools, we sat surrounded by other American tourists with literary inclinations. I gave them a proper once-over. Directly from Middle America, and with one (or more) colorful knit cardigan shoved desperately into their perfect-for-overhead-bin suitcase, they were no threat to me—us. We were a ragtag bunch of eight, but we were plucky and determined. What did they know? We've been studying these White Blokes and the rest of the Irish canon for months now. We had a purpose: we didn't just want to win but we *had* to win. I was not about to return to Bath and let the shame of losing dampen

the rest of our time in class. Besides, I was already accustomed to weekly losses and I really didn't need this addition.

Two men, Colm and Frank—both Dublin-born actors who've been leading this crawl for over twenty years—donned black bowler hats and performed the opening scene from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Our spirited guides for the evening, the pair then led us from The Duke to our first stop under the bell tower at Trinity College, there since the college's founding in 1592. Along the way, they doled out historical facts and tall tales about Joyce, Wilde, Beckett and Brendan Behan (Dead White Blokes numbers one through four). They delighted in the uneducated guesses blurted out by our zany cardigan-wearing counterparts when asked what sport Oscar Wilde played at university. One shouted basketball. Another tried figure skating; we didn't know the right answer, but we were fairly certain it wasn't figure skating. He was evidently a gifted boxer. We were expected to retain most of that information for the quiz at the very end of the tour. We were also expected to keep drinking.

We laughed at their pithy one-liners in between pints of Guinness as we wound our way through back alleys and side streets. Cold air nipped our cheeks and turned them rosy red. Cowering into the next pub, The Old Stand—built in the early 1700s, truly one of the older pubs—Andrew and I huddled in a corner to review for the quiz. I was determined. I used '*above average*' as my quasi-mantra. Besides, the questions had not changed in twenty years, and Andrew had been chaperoning the Dublin trip for

fifteen. It's not cheating if you're supporting a good cause. I was about to order my third pint and drink it with purpose, before Andrew gently reminded me it would in fact be my third pint, and I did want to stay sharp.

Dead White Bloke #1 frequented our final port of call, Davy Byrne's Bar, where the hero of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom stopped for Burgundy wine and a cheese sandwich. The pub was humbly sandwiched in between two rundown stores, and had no real façade to speak of. The interior was where it held bragging rights as an authentic, art deco time capsule. Whitewashed walls were adorned in polished brass, and stained glass graced bar windows giving the small bar room a feeling of sophistication. However, this was one of Behan's favorite haunts—Behan, who famously described himself as a drinker with a writing problem, was likely not as civilized.

We huddled outside the entryway. The time had come for the quiz. Andrew shuffled me up to the front of the bunch, so that I'm just a few feet from Colm and Frank, who stood before us with a sheet of paper. The pints of Guinness had already dissolved what little filter I had left and increased my volume by at least two decibels, so I was prepared.

"Alright," Colm exclaimed. "We shout the questions, you shout the answers. The first few to shout the correct answer will get a point. The most points wins." Frank cleared his throat. "When is Samuel Beckett's birthday?" He yelled. I froze. I hesitated and watched in disbelief as a Cardigan screamed the answer from the middle of the

pack. I knew the answer, too—Good Friday. I felt Andrew prod my arm. I didn't know what happened. The danger of losing was realized and I could feel my cheeks getting hot. I had to keep going.

“Beckett originally contributed to the script of *Oh Calcutta* with which Beatle?” It was Colm's turn to ask the group.

“John Lennon,” I blurted, standing three feet in front of him.

“Okay! Point to the loud blonde.”

I flew through the next two questions with ease. The title of Oscar Wilde's lecture series in the States was? Art and Aesthetics. In which sport did Wilde represent Trinity? Boxing. What was the previous name of The Old Stand? The Monico. I was tied with the Cardigan.

Andrew nudged me on as Colm called out the final question: “Which two nursery rhymes did playwright and novelist Oliver Goldsmith frantically add to Mother Goo—” Before he had time to finish asking, I yelled “HICKORYDICKORYDOCKANDJACKANDJILL.” I could hear Jo cackle from the back of the group as Colm calmly asked me to slowly repeat my winning answer.

I felt far above average, and began to hope for an Irish literature portion at the Brew House in the weeks to come.

& Beyond

fiction

I don't think Mum would've let me come home for the weekend, which is why I didn't tell her. She wouldn't want me back here, especially since leaving was hard enough the first time around back before the term started. I just needed to be away from student housing. Also the laundry machine was busted.

Dad's never home, usually out to the office or a business dinner or lunch or tea or any mundane excuse not to be in the same room as my mother as she lets silence takeover her. I keep walking from the coach station through Southgate Plaza—the bizarrely outdoor mall in Bath—and up gradual hills towards home. Thursday afternoon, Mum will be working at the bookshop so I have time to dump my stuff at the flat and drop in to see her.

The house is quiet as I expected. Queen Square is bustling just outside, full of tourists on buses en route to the Royal Crescent just five minutes up the road. I'm decently sure that's why Dad bought this place all those years ago: it's just about five minutes from every major junction in the already provincial city. It's comforting being here. Each morning when she was getting me ready for primary school she'd make preparations for the beginnings of dinner after busying herself with packing my lunch. The school provided lunch, but she told me it was good practice and that she needed to form habits to keep busy, lest she wind up like that poor Sylvia Plath. I didn't know

what a 'Sylvia Plath' was until years later. Now of course the reference makes some sort of tragic sense.

My gran wanted her to ramble, never settle, live out some ambulatory existence and never be tied town by a husband and a career like she had been. But she died just as Mum was wrapping up her first year at Oxford. I think that's what started the neurosis for her, what started the episodes, when she moved back home to London to care for her father. She tried desperately to not become her mother so she started working. She never went back to school and started temping while pretending she was putting full effort into finding writing jobs. She kept busy.

She continued to make the dinner preparations along with the lunches well after I graduated. She was so set in the routine that I think it was comforting. I shut the front door behind me and it makes the familiar rattling upon impact. The comforting quiet is nice, it feels full. From secondary to sixth form she would obsessively pack my lunches the night before, even though Dad was paying for the cafeteria school lunches; she liked the pattern of peeling and cutting up the organic carrots and arranging them in plastic containers. Every weekday morning Dad would push her. She'd hand me the lunch she packed, and he would nudge her pillbox towards her across the counter. I know she still packs these lunches even now that I've started university, and even now that she has her part-time job at the bookshop. I know it calms her down. Months ago she told me that her continuation of this (neurotic) habit shouldn't be a point of concern,

that she just likes to have snacks in odd places around the house so that she can keep herself entertained on days when she's not at the bookshop.

The house smelled delicately of paint fumes and immediately I'm reminded of their first fight. Mum wasn't one for parenting, that was Dad's role. He would be the one to get mad. She'd scold when she deemed scolding necessary, just to keep up appearances, but when I drew on the white walls with a red marker she simply set her book down on the bedside table, rummaged in a closet to find more markers, and the two of us spent the next hour drawing on the white walls. Dad yelled at Mum for the wall incident, and when I got home from school the next afternoon there were no more colorful marks and the living room reeked of paint and the house was restored to its museum aesthetic.

I'm looking around the white marble countertops and there are no cut-up carrots in their plastic Tupperware. There don't seem to be any signs of her existing in this house at all. I think the quiet is getting to her again.

I shut the front door on my way back out, the familiar rattle sounds slightly more hollow because now I'm worried about her. I walk the five-ish minutes down the street from Queen Square, stopping at the crosswalk diagonally across the street from the Jane Austen Centre. Rain or more rain, the mannequin stuffed into a Regency-era dress and bonnet waves blankly, while propped next to her an elderly man with snowy white mutton-chops and breeches greets passersby in a jolly accent.

“Hullo, Steven!” He hollers from across the intersection, picking up the Jane Austen mannequin’s arm and waving it in my direction. Though I’ve seen him nearly every day since I was a toddler, I never remember his name. I wave politely and jaywalk across the road to avoid further conversations where I’m sure he’ll ask about Mum and Dad and my studies. Mum loved to talk with the locals when she first moved out here from London. She’d always say how refreshing it was to be around real people with unconventional backgrounds and unconventional outlooks on life. Mr. Austen had accidentally dislocated the mannequin arm from the plastic socket in his efforts to flag me down. I keep a brisk pace to Mr. B’s Emporium of Reading Delights (it’s Bath, I’ve learned not to question the oddity) to drop in on Mum.

I couldn’t stand thinking of her in that house alone. She’d make lunches and rearrange the oddly mismatched pieces of antique French furniture and deliberately make scuff marks on the hardwood floors and the white walls to see if Dad would notice. So I made him promise he’d find her something to do during the day.

“Afternoon, Josephine,” I smile at one of Mum’s coworkers. She’s the type who looks incessantly cheery, matching a bright cardigan to each day of the week. Thursday is some shade of lilac, apparently.

“Hello, Steven!” She exudes exclamation points.

“Mum upstairs?” The fewer words to the poor girl the better.

“I don’t believe she’s in today, love,” she shakes her head. “No, not today. She said she needed to stay home. Bit of a cold I think.”

“She wasn’t home,” I half-mutter to myself which Josephine mistakes as a continuation to the conversation.

“Oh my, maybe she’s out running errands? She’s mentioned her walks to the Crescent lately,” she prattles on. “You know, in the two years she’s worked with us she’s never once agreed to come out to after-work tea!”

“Huh, odd. Yeah, I’ll try up at the Crescent. Thanks,” my gratitude is tinged with annoyance. Mum doesn’t go on walks. She hates the Crescent, but I leave Mr. B’s and find myself walking up Landsdown Road towards Julian Road and in seven-ish minutes I see what looks like my mother pushing a red leather office chair up a strange hill towards a line of row houses.

* * *

There’s a small street I live on, Northampton Street. I live there because it’s away. It’s away from bigness and buildings and it’s away from people. It’s beyond the Royal Crescent and the Circus, it’s not too far away that you’d need to take a bus, but it’s just off of the tourist maps.

Down my hill lined with Bath-beige row houses on either side, there's a small park. I think a church once stood there before the Bath Blitz, when it was leveled along with large portions of the city. Bath looked at the residual gauges the incendiaries made in the Cotswold Hills and crescents, and rebuilt them in exact replicas of what they once were. Save for this small park at Julian Road and Northampton Street. The church was never rebuilt in its exact location, but moved a block up the road where it would be safe.

I don't miss London. The temp agency was tired until they placed me in Dan's real estate office. Everything and everyone was busy and moving and I didn't have to be busy and moving if I didn't want to but at least I had the option to be busy and moving. Here I don't have the option. Here it's more acceptable to be routine and tired and settled. It's my fault I'm here. I was twenty and he was older and he had a routine and was settled and that was safe and appealing and I was an excellent receptionist for his office. Bath was just starting to develop as a luxury weekend destination, so we married in a small church in London with one witness and moved to Bath. I don't miss home.

There's a cluttered charity shop on one side of Julian Road that caters twentieth-century forgotten suitcases without wheels, which have cloth lining boasting cheery patterns. There's always a man smoking a hand-rolled cigarette standing at the door of the shop leaning on a decrepit mahogany office chair, indicating at the genuine red

leather cushions as you smile and keep walking past. Past the allegedly Greek carryout restaurant that guarantees a free cheese pizza with any order, the dry cleaners, the deceptively middle class hair salon, there's a small market. The Co-op has maybe five aisles, one of which is fresh produce, the rest are pre-packaged foods, pre-prepared meals, and booze. This is always my second stop on my way to the house from Homebase, the home improvement store across the river.

The base of Northampton widens before the steepness of the hill surprises you a quarter of the way up. You have to work to climb it to get to my flat. My house. The Georgian houses stand at bland attention and climb tirelessly up the small hill; three-story beige tin soldiers each with a different colored door in odd variations of green-grey and blue-grey and grey-grey, all with the same curved, white-bordered trim. I stand at the base of the hill with my Homebase bag threatening to snap at the weight of the can of paint. My other hand grips the bottle of white wine by the neck, the stale air of tobacco lingers as I peer up my quiet street. It narrows as you walk up, and turns slightly to the right, just enough that you can't see my house from the main road.

My house is not empty, it's waiting. I think it's waiting for more quiet and maybe a piece of furniture or two. I'm still standing on the corner until I make an executive decision to double back to the charity shop before the handles of the plastic bag give up. The man gestures to one of the suitcases without wheels or the genuine red leather office chair with wheels. I hand him twenty pounds, place the bottle of wine

and the bag of paint on the seat cushion to the delight of the plastic handles, and begin to roll the chair back towards Northampton.

I've settled on the canvas-coated floor across from my chair, and pried open this week's paint with my house key. A muted lilac with dominating notes of grey that reminds me too much of *Jane Eyre*, and I am reminded of colorless purple ideas I'd had that morning picking up the paint with furiously bleary eyes. I look at the paint lid and consider how it looks like the lid to a pint of ice cream, rifts and ridges melt into cool rivulets as I tilt the lid watching the paint in drips on the grimy drop cloth. I examine the four walls of the empty living room. I don't like last week's color. The muted orange was a failed attempt to jump the gun on feeling content.

It looked too much like my namesake. Fanny Brice belts 'Don't Rain On My Parade' in a sunburned orange dress, before she becomes Sadie Sadie, Married Lady. Mum named me Sadie and never gave me the chance for orange. I'd been too eager on my weekly trip to Homebase, and the salesman said the tinged orange would complement my skin tone. That it would make a lovely room for me to sit in, and simply sitting suddenly sounded like the greatest idea anyone has ever had, so I bought the sunburned orange and painted all four walls of my living room which was a dramatic change from the eggshell-cream I had painted it the week before. When I first put down the lease on my house in July, the walls were too white. They expected too much of me, and I could tell they wanted me to fill them and hang works of mediocre

art with sentimental value over a newly reupholstered couch that Stevie would sit on when he'd visit from uni, and Dan would come home after work and stamp his feet onto the ottoman that I had picked up from one of Bath's many antique shops, and I'd chastise him and he'd joke about how I was always nagging him and why didn't I fetch the nice tea set as our loving son made the long trek from Kent to see his dear old parents just for a weekend.

That house was too white; it was put together where you feel you can't touch anything, each item has a place because I'd try to move my scavenged French antiques ever so slightly just to see if Dan would notice. He noticed the scuffmarks on the walls from the back of a decrepit rocking chair I moved from its distant place in the corner and he yelled something about taking pills.

The white was too expectant and it began to close in on me the minute I signed the lease. So I went to Homebase and bought eggshell-cream, not *white* white, but a more lived in white. The next few weeks I would make incremental changes from white into other color families, moving into warm beiges and then a blush pink, and I thought I was doing well. I wasn't happy, but I was in a space that was mine and Dan didn't know, so I went with the orange. That was too over-zealous. I finish one wall of the living room before noon.

I don't live here with my husband, nor do I live there with Stevie—though to be fair he's just starting his second year at Kent, so he hasn't lived with us for months. Our

house is just that: ours. It's not mine. I never want it to be mine because it never wants to distance itself from anything. Instead, it likes to be minutes from the city centre on Queen Square. Five minutes from Sainsbury's, five minutes from Dan's real estate firm, five minutes from Mr. B's, five minutes from the Crescent. When Stevie was in grade school, it was six minutes from his bus stop.

I work three days a week at Mr. B's, according to my husband. Dan's office has him out at 7:30 in the morning and he isn't home until half past 6 in the evening. Monday through Friday, he thinks I walk the five minutes from Queen Square to John Street where I walk through the white door laced with royal purple trim at 8 am sharp. He thinks five days out of the week I'm helping Ed and Josephine rearrange book displays and open the shop, advise customers and passersby and make the best reading suggestions. But I'm not. Well, I am, but only three days out of the week. I know Stevie's behind it all. He worries about my being home all the time which he really shouldn't do as it feels wrong to call Queen Square home. He pushed Dan to arrange the job for me, he'd never tell me but I know he did. Still, it's never been my own to complain about or relish in or skip out on three days a week.

The other two, I'm painting my own house. It's mine because it's quiet and unassuming and changing. I'm painting my house and repainting my house, and drinking bottles of wine which I know Dan would resent me for, yet somehow it's okay

because I'm only walking an extra four minutes from Queen Square. And I'm only doing that twice a week.

I run my index finger through the grey-lilac lid I've placed on the canvas, and pick up my house key again, this time advancing towards the bottle of wine. Ruined shards of cheap cork litter the drop cloth after several stabs with the key. I sit and sip from the bottle, staring at the genuine red leather and mahogany office chair. With wheels. The leather has adventurous cracks in small places where it intersects with the wood and when I scoot forward and examine it, I can see bits of cloudy white foam cowering beneath. The chair reminds me too much of Dan; it's too brash how it just sits there, taking up space, cracks and all. It takes too much pride in its antiquity and it uses words like 'stoic' to describe itself when no one has even attached such words to its personality before. I don't like its ego. It starts to remind me of Stevie.

With my grey-lilac index finger I swipe a line of color over the wood and the chair is silent now. The bucket of paint goes into a tin. I take the paint roller, still coated in stale orange happiness attempts from last week, and begin to coat the genuine red leather in my Eyre grey-lilac.

The chair blends perfectly with the one wall I've finished. My waiting house sighs when I start to walk through and open the windows to let in the English damp. Nearly 5:30. I shut off the lights and seal the paint, admiring my formerly genuine office chair against my formerly happily orange walls before locking up but the

doorbell's ringing apprehensively which I didn't know was possible and suddenly the Eyre lilac reminds me of hospital rooms in muted colors.

I don't want to open the door but I do.

"Mum?"

"Steven," the exclamation sounded like more of an inquiry than I anticipated. I look a mess, I'm sure. I'm also concerned as to why my first concern was my own appearance when my son is standing with his jaw to the ground in the doorway of my layered lilac palace. He's known about the pills and the bipolar diagnosis and the depression, he's never known about the post-partum and the white walls at that house he grew up in; he doesn't know that I stopped the meds when I was pregnant and he doesn't know how his father resents me. But he knows I pushed him to start university, he knows I didn't finish my degree and he knows I wouldn't let that happen to him. As far as he knows, I've been doing fine since he left for Kent.

Normal. He'll probably need normal, something that sounds routine, perhaps. Like this is always how I greet him. This is normal.

"Ready to go home?" I sound stilted. I am home, but he doesn't know that and how could he know that.

"I just got—Mum what is this place?"

"No matter, honest. I'm ready to go home, we should go home."

"You're covered in paint."

“Alright, well, all in a days’ work, hm?”

“Mum, are you—“

“Help me lock up?”

He nods, still plainly stunned.

“Oh come on, Stevie, uni hasn’t turned you into such an incapable ass that you can’t find a couple of light switches. Go down the hall and nab the kitchen light, would you?” If I shut off the living room before he sees it, maybe he won’t see the chair. Maybe the Jane Eyre lilacs will go to sleep quietly and on their own tonight.

Stevie walks back to the small galley kitchen, closes the back window and turns off the lights. He’s still silent.

“The walk back should be quite nice this evening,” I keep talking because I’m afraid of his silence. “Very nice.”

The seven-minute walk takes longer tonight. Largely because Stevie is there beside me. I make sure to slow my steps down the hill now slick with deep mist, and wait for nearly every car to pass on Julian Road before crossing to the small park. He’s preoccupied with confusion so he can’t walk as fast. The small street trailing from the site of the old church drops you off right next to the Royal Crescent. To the left is the Circus roundabout, and I explain to him that straight on is the walking path I use to reduce the walk to its appropriate length of seven minutes.

“Mum?”

“Hm?”

“I don’t know how to talk to you about—”

“Normally I take the shorter route, but today I’ll make an exception for this lovely weather we’re having.”

A red double-decker bus shimmies up beside the sidewalk to let out day-tripping tourists and holiday-goers at the Crescent museum. The hopeful souls who had laid out on the Crescent lawn with blankets and books I’ve probably sold them are shuffling papers back into too-small purses, and fathers are extending the bottoms of their coats like bat wings to shield wives and little ones from the now oppressive mist. The shorter route takes me behind all the shops and the squares and the quaint buskers and sights I don’t want to see because I miss living on the outskirts.

“It’s nearly raining, Mum.” I can read poor Stevie’s confusion without even looking in his direction.

“Ah well, an exception for my boy then, is that better?” I push through a smile and a darting glance to his face which is riddled with quiet terror and I know what he wants to say, but how can he possibly ask me because I’m no authority on anything, and we’ve never had such grown-up conversations.

“Mum, I don’t know how to ask you about this, but are you—”

“Right, let’s turn this way.”

I take him by the elbow and we veer down the walking path that hems Victoria Park. I'm nervous and he knows I'm nervous and all I can do is plod onwards through the park until we're face to face with Queen Square and our flat that's not Jane Eyre lilac but red genuine leather.

* * *

She has to be off her meds. She's practically running down the path until Queen Square and she stops dead when she sees home. I don't know. I don't think I want to know. I have a weird knotting feeling that she's having an affair, then she'll try to talk to me about it, but she'll preface it with some line about how she thinks I'm old enough to understand the situation. With my mother I know that I'll never be old enough to understand anything about her. I nearly stopped trying when I left for school. But that house. She hates the Crescent, there are too many people for her to be comfortable but maybe she found someone else to be comfortable around. Maybe that's why she has that house, for the two of them. Maybe that would be better. I know she's unhappy, but she never seemed to acknowledge it, instead she just kept busily packing my lunches and passively downing the anti-everything pills prescribed to her with the promise that she'd definitely feel better if the dosage was increased. She never did anything. But maybe this house was her starting to do something.

Three grimy orange walls and one light purple, with that bizarre chair painted the same purple just standing there. The drop cloth was a poor imitation of a Jackson Pollock but with the added visual of picked apart bits of cork scattered around an empty wine bottle. She was supposed to be doing okay when I first left last year. That's why Dad set up the job at Mr. B's when she refused to continue therapy, in the hopes that a new routine would help her. Also probably so he wouldn't have to make any hands-on effort. He didn't even know what dosage she was supposed to be on. His excuse was that was supposed to be my area or expertise.

"We are gonna go home, right?" I am genuinely unsure of the answer at this rate, "Mum all of my stuff is in the house, I think I'll need to at least dart back in at some—"

"Oh you were never one for a leisurely walk, were you?" I don't know why she sounds this cheery.

"I don't think that's the root of the issue here, I don't know how to even begin to ask you—"

"Besides, love, where else would we be going?"

"The train station?"

"Oh Stevie, we're already home why would we get on a train?"

"To go to London—"

“Come along, Stevie,” and she’s back to tugging at my elbow. She reminds me too much of a small child in a zoo who gets mysteriously separated from his parents, then grabs the arm of the nearest adult thinking it’s Dad. She has the same look of embarrassment tinged with the same forced notions of ‘It’ll be ok, I meant to do that.’

She fumbles with the key just like she used to before she started seeing the doctor. She laughs delicately, it sounds like she’s been rehearsing just how to laugh as to not warrant any further questions into her wellbeing. The door busts open before I have another opportunity to fail and ask her what the hell is going on.

“Tea?”

I shake my head, not in this context. The ritual would seem too stilted now.

“Coffee, then?”

“Mum no, I don’t want a drink I just want—”

“Gin.”

“What?”

“Gin, I never taught you how to properly drink gin and it’s right time you learn.

No son of mine is going to continue schooling not knowing how to properly drink a nice glass of gin.”

“Oh Christ, Mum, I add tonic and hold my nose. I know how to drink gin.”

“Don’t be cheeky, Steven, we are a gin family.”

I want to yell at her: *that doesn’t mean anything*. She’s not okay.

“Fine, teach me. But you know Dad’s gonna be home in a half hour and—”

Her tone stays forcefully level, “Steven, why are you asking me all of these questions? Don’t you want to spend some nice time with your mother? Isn’t that why you dropped in, unannounced for the weekend?”

“That, and laundry.” I sit on a brown leather armchair that dominates the far corner of the living room as she whirls from her fixed position across the open room in the kitchen.

“Here,” in strides she hands me a short glass of gin, straight up.

“What about the lesson?”

“Drink.”

“Oh,” I watch as she slides the entire glass of pine-scented liquid past her lips. I just look at the specks of dust that break the surface in my glass, and swirl the gin around until I can see a small cloud forming.

She’s not okay here. That new house is her way out; maybe this new man is better to her so I don’t have to keep pretending every laundry machine in Kent breaks every other month, or deliberately leaving important items in my room so I have to return home for a weekend.

She eyes the brown leather chair warily and elects to perch herself on the metal and glass coffee table across from it. Her eyes are grey and I don’t remember them ever

dancing near that color. Her dyed-blond hair looks unwashed and oily so the roots lie shiny and flat against her head and give off the same sheen of preened feathers.

“Mum you look... I mean, are you—”

“Darling please try to complete a sentence, I’ll only be below-forty for so many years and my frown lines don’t have the patience.”

I inhale the gin and ask hopefully, “Are you having an affair?”

She laughs a Tinkerbell laugh and I don’t know if it’s the gin or not, but I want to laugh with her.

“Darling, no. Of course not. I love your father.”

Shit. “You sound like you’ve rehearsed this, are you sure you’re not having an affair?”

“Steven, don’t you think I’d know whether or not I was sleeping with someone other than your father?”

“Jesus, Mum I don’t need to—”

“I mean, truly. The mere thought of being a cheater is appalling,” she alights from her perch and flits back towards the gin bottle on the counter.

“Mum, Dad’s gonna be home soon.”

“And?”

“And I just know that he doesn’t like to see you drinking. Unless something’s changed and you’re back on your prescriptions.”

She laughs again but I don't want to join her.

"Everything's fine, love. It's just the house."

"This house?"

"No, love. The house on Northampton, the one you saw."

"Mum what the hell is going on? You're not having an affair, but are you finally going to move—"

"Your father doesn't know, and I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't mention it to him. It'll be our secret, okay?" Her laugh jingles. "Now I know just how clichéd that sounds, believe me darling, but I can't have your father knowing."

"I don't know what I'm not telling him. You aren't explaining anything, you're not *doing* anything, you're talking and somehow saying nothing."

"That's always been a talent in our family, hasn't it," she pours another glass of gin and eases herself against the counter and I hear Dad outside the door shuffling papers and jingling keys.

"Quick, your glass," Mum beckons the empty glass towards her and darts into the kitchen where she stands over the sink, gripping the sides of the counter.

* * *

Poor Stevie sits in that encompassing leather chair and he looks like his father.
The key turns in the lock and my heart breaks.

I douse some water in our glasses and stow the bottle back in the bar. Stevie's
always looked after me, especially around Dan.

Los Angeles, I'm Yours²

nonfiction

Rummaging around the garage one afternoon, I unearthed my dad's old Nokia cell phone from the late 80s. A grey plastic cinderblock with an antennae, my friend and I thought it was the ultimate garage-find, so we took an empty cardboard box and played 'Car' instead of 'House.' We would take turns in the driver's seat—a coveted role in the front left quadrant of the box—because whoever played the driver got to use the phone to call important people. My friend took her turn behind the imaginary wheel and used the one-hand method, placing one hand on the wheel and the other to hold the phone to her ear. She answered the one-sided conversation pretending to chew a piece of gum. I cut her off after a few generous minutes to switch places. Since the phone was about the size of my entire forearm, wedging it between my ear and shoulder proved a bit of a task. After a few slip-ups I finally managed to keep the phone balanced and use both hands to steer the box as we quickly moved nowhere. My friend was impressed; she had never seen something so grown-up. I determined that her parents must not have been as cool.

Our house was quaint and perfect, white picket fence and paint peeling off of white wood panels beneath a huge bay window. But I grew up in my parents' cars. The cars were home.

² Title lovingly borrowed from a song of the same name by The Decemberists.

I remember watching things. Before I knew to pay attention to street names and traffic patterns, I memorized landmarks and the different routes we took to the same locations. As a kid in a car seat in the late 90s, there wasn't much to do to entertain yourself. I got carsick easily so books were out of the question, and I'm sure I brought a doll on occasion. I looked forward to when we were stopped on the freeway for multiple minutes and I could just look at the people in the cars next to us and make up little stories about them in my head. I'd probably start telling them to whichever parent was driving that day, and they'd smile and nod, glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure I hadn't squirmed out of the car seat. I'd listen to them talk to traffic, constantly asking questions I certainly wasn't equipped to answer. They'd talk on their cell phones to whomever we were on our way to see, spending the next five minutes complaining about the traffic we were in, with the phone squeezed between their shoulder and their ear. I thought that was one of the coolest talents, something I would later practice with my friends on play dates.

The most grown-up thing anyone could do in a car was turn around in the seat and reverse, beyond talking on the phone and magically being able to keep both hands on the wheel, and beyond being able to question motives of other drivers. There's that air of superiority that accompanies the motion of twisting your back, placing your right arm behind the passenger headrest, and skewing your upper body to properly see behind you. I associated that series of movements with being an adult in Los Angeles;

you could drive well enough to maneuver yourself and the car at the same time. Their hands always made a very distinctive sound on the leather when they would reach over to grab the headrest. My parents' hands slightly sweaty from mixing with the leather steering wheel baking in the sun, diligently pressing on the headrest. It was a subtle and safe sound, one that I equated with adulthood in my mind. My mom would do this as we backed out of the driveway, leaving to drop me off at my dad's house. I'd watch her look over my head through the window, calculating her next turn onto the street behind us, her palm would make that safe sound on the headrest. The only instance in which my dad neglected to make this move was when we were taking the camper up to Leo Carrillo. It was impossible to see all the way out the back window, so he would just make a series of wild head turns to look back and forth between each side mirror. He would always over-exaggerate, it always made me giggle, and it always made me slightly uneasy.

Moving from a car seat to a booster seat and finally to nothing at all was mildly monumental. Except I couldn't see as much out of the window anymore. When getting in the backseat, I would immediately sit on my ankles, with my legs folded underneath me. As soon as my mom turned around in the driver's seat to back out of the driveway she would make me unfold my legs. Apparently it wasn't safe.

You figure out if you prefer the Westside over East LA based on how long you prefer to sit in traffic, but until then you revel in the smell of leather seats soaking in

sun, and trying not to kick the drivers' seat too hard so that your dad will notice and a freckled arm will dart from the drivers' seat and playfully whack your foot away. You try and get comfortable in the booster seat until your mom will see you wiggling and moving the seatbelt and will whirl around to face you, elbow-length golden hair glaring in the sun, while still magically and safely driving down Pico Boulevard. That is normal when you grow up there. I don't remember being bored in the car, I remember feeling safe and excited to go places.

* * *

There's a beach on the Pacific Coast Highway that used to be little known. About an hour outside of LA-proper, you drive up PCH and you pass turn-offs to the Palisades, to Topanga, to Malibu. You pass three beaches before you get to the humble and unassuming turn-off for Leo Carrillo State Park. We drive up during summer weekends, spending a day at the beach with Elroy, my parents' first Springer Spaniel and my first dog, careening his head out the open window in the back seat. We'd usually go up on the Fourth of July to camp, driving up in the 1985 Toyota Dolphin RV with frayed brown leather seats and shedding shag carpeting we inherited from my grandfather. To fit the California surfer imposter aesthetic I was striving for as a kid, I got us a hula girl to stick on the dash. My dad laughed, and the next week before we drove up he bought a set of purple fuzzy dice for the rearview mirror. The unspoken

rule of the crummy radio was that it should either be playing NPR or The Beach Boys. The important bit was that I got to flip back and forth, now that I was in the front seat.

Life in Los Angeles is marked and limited by driving. For the environmentally conscious, Santa Monica-based families, going to the onslaught of bat and bar mitzvahs depended largely on carpooling. For the Westwood and Beverly Hills families, Sweet Sixteen cakes were iced with rumors of what kind of car she convinced her parents to buy.

You especially grow to love the front seat because that's all you'll know until at least sixteen. Those evenings being driven around by parents were moments and hours to learn the span of the city. I memorized the order of the major boulevards and avenues in West LA, and in which direction certain freeways run. I would stare out the window from my car seat and observe my dad listening intently to NPR's Car Talk—the radio program I once abhorred but grew to love whenever it came on when I would drive around post-license. In Santa Monica, the old neighborhood, I absorbed blocks of concrete scattered with root pry, and the familiar image of the small blue and white bungalow buildings at the very end of the street that you saw at a distance when driving down to the house. I memorized traffic patterns, and shortcuts to the airport all from the backseat. I turned fifteen, having long since moved to the front seat of the car, and still would inquire about which route we were going to take to get to Brentwood from our house in Mar Vista. I'd make suggestions that were frequently taken into

account over the instructions of one of the GPS apps on our phones. I probably made some subconscious vow to myself that I would carry this innate sense of direction throughout my adult life as a Los Angeles driver. I had seen both my parents navigate through the city with ease; I had even seen my friends do it. Although for the first six months of being a licensed driver, my best friend refused to drive on any freeway.

It might be Stockholm syndrome, but when you grow up here you grow up eagerly awaiting the time spent in the car. You're proud of the faint sunburn on your left arm; it's a badge of honor, earned by those who patiently sit in summer traffic. You don't start to earn it when you get your learners' permit at fifteen and a half, instead the badge is given out to those who got their permits on time, and who valiantly drove their friends around on weekends when parents couldn't be bothered. I was lucky in that my parents didn't mind driving me to friends' houses or to the mall—my dad was usually the one to drop me off with my group of other 16-year-olds at someone's palatial yet understated house in Benedict Canyon. He wouldn't complain about the traffic, he never got road rage. Those were usually traits my mom demonstrated when it took us an hour to travel two miles during rush hour. But she was a Transplant from Long Island.

Fifteen and a half was when the learner's permits would hit. Little slips of paper you were to keep on hand at all times so you could be the one behind the wheel, seen by all of your classmates pulling out of the driveway from school one afternoon with

your parent in the passenger seat. Having your permit is all about being seen, but having your license is where you take your first step towards LA citizenship.

Now you have real cause to gripe with other imposter adults. You had to stand in line at the DMV, and take your driving test. You'll follow suit with all the other girls in your grade and drive out to the location in Winnetka with one parent, because Winnetka has fewer stop signs and wider avenues and there's less traffic. You'll fail the hand signal portion because your dad failed to remind you that would be on the test. You drive around for fifteen minutes making left-hand turns and apologizing when the instructor tells you that you drive like a grandma, then you get another piece of paper which is more ammo for your inevitable complaining sessions with your friends.

There's an unofficially official list of driving firsts you must complete before you can be inducted as a true citizen of your own car. Usually, most people rush through this list when they start to drive upon getting their learner's permit at fifteen and a half. The list varies person to person, but the main points stay the same: drive over 35 MPH, drive on the freeway, cut someone off, parallel park successfully, and parallel park unsuccessfully but not bother to fix it and just leave your car there for the next three hours. The last one is easy to check off.

I waited leisurely to take the written exam, and didn't bother to start driver's ed until the summer after my junior year in high school. I didn't feel the need to get my permit at fifteen and a half. If I had to go anywhere on the weekends while at my dad's

house, he would happily drop me off. And I never really went anywhere on school nights when I was at my mom's house, because I was an only child with a very minimal social life, who had homework and an eagerness to watch TV. I used the same program my friends used, where a driving instructor with some form of energy efficient car would drive to your house and accompany you around Los Angeles for an hour. My mom did take me to first to the vacant parking lot of the Santa Monica DMV one day to practice in her shiny new sedan, but I refused to exceed 8 MPH and wouldn't shut up about how sensitive the brakes were. I quietly decided that my mom shouldn't be the one to impart her Transplant knowledge, and that my lessons should come from a true Native. Or from a third party. Before we resorted to an outside company, however, my dad adhered to his romantic view of calmly teaching his kid how to drive.

While not a Los Angeles native, my dad was born and raised in California. He did not complain about other drivers, and would only contribute to the tediously typical traffic talks with the occasional nod. I picked up most of my driving mannerisms from my parents, and a few from my friends. My dad drives using both feet—one always on the gas, the other always on the break--but in teaching me to drive he luckily adopted the 'do as I say and not as I do' method. Even in the most dire of traffic patterns, even around the most idiotic of drivers, he never got mad. He would just grow curious, questioning why on Earth they had decided to reverse, and merge back into the lane, still managing to cut him off in the process. I never noticed I had

adopted this inquisitive driving style until I was navigating around Massachusetts, wondering out loud to no one why the idiot in front of me was moving at a near-glacial pace. After being a defensive driver, the best and biggest crowd-pleaser trait I picked up from my father from years of backseat observing rears its lighthearted head. If and when I'm behind a naïve asshole who just won't make this right-hand turn when there is clearly a very large break in the traffic, he would yell: "Punch it, Chewie!" Sometimes it does work, and this particular 'Chewie' — who is usually driving some uselessly large car — will punch it and boldly make a simple turn.

Theoretically, I was then able to drive. Technically and legally speaking I needed fifty hours behind the wheel with an adult present before I could drive by myself with a learner's permit, but everyone lies about that anyways. I thought all of that observing from the backseat to the passenger's seat would pay off when I finally got behind a wheel that wasn't imaginary. But I panicked. I was allegedly the adult and I was allegedly supposed to know where I was going and the order of the major streets in West LA and Santa Monica and the optimal times to run errands during the weekend and traffic patterns and how to drive defensively.

To start the fifty hours, my dad drove us to the Culver City DMV one Sunday afternoon when they were closed. Our '99 Honda Accord wasn't as responsive as it probably was in its prime, so we decided it would be a good car for me to drive. I started out going a cool 7 MPH, making very creative turns around the empty lot. After

a few minutes, my dad suggests I turn into the drive-through counter on the side of the building. Keeping my wild pace, I steadily maneuver through, hugging the right side of the drive-through that wasn't lined with yellow concrete posts. Once I think I've cleared the drive-through median, he tells me to make a u-turn. Even in theory the idea baffled me, so I reduced my speed and started to turn, steering directly into one of the poles dotting the median.

"Okay, Kiddo, you've hit the pole."

I've started yelling obscenities and frantically looking around for somewhere to go or some solution.

"Moirra, you need to stop the car."

I apparently had kept my foot on the gas, and now the pole was scraping the front bumper. I stop the car and start crying. My dad is trying not to laugh as he evenly explains that I need to reverse just a little bit so that I can straighten out the car and drive forward before making the turn. I start to reverse and look over my shoulder, gripping the steering wheel with both hands.

"Kiddo, try putting one hand back here on the headrest, so you can turn around to see what you're about to hit, because you're about to hit the building."

Still teary-eyed, I finally made the grown-up move I exalted as a child, and slowly began to correct the turn. The driving lesson was over very shortly after that. My dad made me drive half of the way home, until I got so frustrated that I pulled over

and flat out refused to drive down Venice Boulevard because it was greater than two lanes. After seeing the lines of yellow paint that now graced the bumper of the dark green car, we collectively decided I should log my driving hours with an outside hire.

One of the line items that my father personalized for my driving experience was to drive all the way down Sunset Boulevard until we hit PCH. His ultimate goal was to get me to drive all the way to Leo Carrillo, so he could put his feet up on the dash (something I was never allowed to do in the car with my mom) and control the radio. I was sure I'd always know how to get to Leo Carrillo. It was poetic justice, as my dad once tried to explain. He would be the one driving us up there in the dark green '99 Honda Accord with cracked tan leather interior—the car I grew up in—then once I had my license, I would be his chauffeur in the same car. He would grin slyly and waggle his eyebrows over his glasses whenever he brought up the license I had yet to obtain. I was already seventeen, and getting me to drive without crying was a feat my dad was always ready to undertake. We would make the hour drive up PCH with the dog in the backseat, inevitably stopping at Malibu Seafood for chowder and a fish platter, Astro panting under the red picnic table unable to decide whether to beg for food or to get back in the car. Knowing I was still terrified to drive over 25 MPH, my dad would finish his chowder, look at me with his arms outstretched and tell me it was my turn. I froze and immediately turned on the GPS the moment I got in the car.

It's that very moment you realize you've become one of them: one of the Natives disguised as Transplants, suddenly relying on apps and on others to tell you where to go and what to do in a city you've grown up in. You don't like that thought. You want to tune that out because you're a goddamn Native Angeleno and you have all the anecdotes of a Native Angeleno. You're one of the podcast-listeners who inevitably have to resort to a book on tape because their four-mile commute to work in the morning suddenly takes an hour. You are a very real citizen of LA. You're inducted when you've built up anecdotal stories of having to turn left from a stop sign on 14th street onto Pico Boulevard and you just sit there for multiple minutes because you're too scared. I heard the phrase 'defensive driver' too much growing up in backseats. It took leaving LA and coming back a year later to realize what that meant.

Transplants will complain about the traffic at first to feel and seem like they fit in. They'll hold topical conversations at work once they've lived here for a few months, and hit all the standard talking points: the drought, remember when they closed the 405, did you see the snow on the Grapevine, parking in this neighborhood is a nightmare, it took me over an hour to get in this morning when it usually takes me 45 minutes. There will be a collective moan from the group, and one person will inevitably say: *yeah, everyone was just sitting there for ages*. They might even compare the gas mileage of their cars, which will be the moment they'll realize they all have a Prius, making the conversation awkwardly pointless.

The Transplants will carry on in this self-indulgent manner because they simply don't know any better. They're copying what they've seen in movies and on TV and mimicking what they've overheard from any perceived Natives. My mom assimilated seamlessly. She adopted the mannerisms and the appropriate amount of irritability over paralyzing traffic patterns; she had over twenty years of LA living to practice the Native ways, but she upheld a few East coast traditions. She retains a suspicion of every driver on the road, escalating defensive driving to intimidating levels. I find I swing back and forth between her aggressive yelling at surrounding cars, and my dad's constant inquiries, until they've fused into this string of loud curiosity hurled at passing drivers.

Other Transplants think that the constant complaining is the culture of Los Angeles, that purely hating driving and traffic and parallel parking and driving in the rain and driving in the sun and just sitting there for ages is normal. They're wrong.

* * *

I was quietly terrified to come back home from school for the first time after my first semester of college. I was scared I'd forgotten everything. There has to be a statistic, but the one commonly spread around the city is that Angelenos spend up to 60% of their lives in their cars. It's completely false, but when you're sitting in traffic on the 405 trying to go about a thousand feet to get on the 10 it feels very real.

After the traditionally wind-knocking and wonderfully suffocating hug, the very next thing my dad did when he picked me up at the airport was hand me the keys.

“Alright, let’s go home,” he said it so casually. He said it as if I actually had gotten my permit the day after I hit fifteen and a half, or if I had been the first of my friend group to get her license right on her sixteenth birthday and if I had been driving daily for the past two years.

“C’mon Kiddo, the cops are about to tell us to move let’s go,” he had already put my suitcase in the trunk and was halfway in the passenger side. “We gotta stop at In-n-Out, I’m hungry.”

I wordlessly got in the car and began navigating my way out of LAX.

“Oh, Car Talk is on,” he reached over and turned up the volume and then reclined the seat until he was practically lounging with his hands behind his head.

“I could take a nap right here,” he laughed lightly, “this is perfect.” Suddenly I was comfortable again. I could drone out NPR if I felt so inclined, and just sit in my own transitory home.

Since then, I take any opportunity to get in my car. I’ll miss the traffic because it’s something so despised by so many people that I can make it my own little respite from school or from work or from people.

Traffic is romantic; it’s one of the few places in the city where you feel completely alone and engaged with everyone all at once. It’s thought provoking. You can be

basically parked on the on-ramp to the 10 for nearly half-an-hour and look out over West LA and try to locate your old street from new angles. That can spiral into remembering your old commute to school each morning, that was the year your mom insisted that the family see a nutritionist which meant the year you discovered you could sneak teaspoons of sugar into cardboard cereal when she wasn't looking. Suddenly you're ruminating on moments of your childhood and you've been staring at the same clump of trees for eight minutes, just sitting there.

Maybe it is a rose-colored-lens scenario, but traffic is something I don't realize I missed until I'm back home and I've been baking in the same '99 Honda Accord for forty-five minutes when I'm only trying to drive three miles. My spurts of driving in Massachusetts are not incredibly frequent, and I flat out refuse to drive in New York, so LA is the only place I can connect with the crowded road.

I haven't been back to Leo Carrillo in almost a year, but when the two of us went back it was changed. The paved parking lot by the dog beach was eroded and chunks had nonchalantly detached and lodged themselves in the soft sand below. A few lazy traffic cones and shredded caution tape marked off the potentially dangerous parts. The beach felt smaller. The dog still worked himself up to his seal-bark level of excitement, and refused to leave our side as we trudged to a pile of rocks to eat the breakfast pastries we brought up with us. The three of us were silently glad to be back in the car after about an hour of meandering. In the car I was safe from the erosion and

from the dramatic desolation of my favorite childhood destination. We rubbed the sand from our feet and by some miracle I convinced my dad to drive back home.

It took us well over an hour on PCH in traffic but I didn't mind it. Astro immediately shoved his head out the back window to let the wind pull his eyes and ears back towards the ocean, and the car became a soothing mix of salt and sand and sun-baked leather. I preferred the drive and the car to the beach because the drive is what makes LA home. That's what lets me attach quaint and quiet small-town adjectives to a place the rest of the world loves to hate and watch as the ultimate vapid spectacle. But they're wrong. They're wrong because in LA we have the drives and the traffic. The traffic is quiet and it's safe and it means I'm from somewhere.

Superbloom

fiction

So there's this drought. It's been going on for a while. It's done some hefty damage. Not just to the environment and to the economy, it also hasn't done any favors for my personal and social life, which is a selfish notion but it truly comes with the territory.

June's apartment is nice, she's giving me a family discount, but her water conservation policies are slowly killing me. The cardinal rule is that there always has to be enough water for her chinchillas. That's the only rule. And she gets pissed if I ever take a shower longer than seven minutes because apparently that's bad for the chinchillas' supply.

She threatened to oust me when I couldn't make rent last month and I'm relieved. She's not proving to be a delightful post-grad roommate.

"When was your last shower?" The first time I'd shut off the TV and picked up a book in about a year, June must be able to sense when I don't want a distraction.

"This morning," I don't look up.

"Are you lying?"

"It's my own personal hygiene, why would I lie? I enjoy being clean. I showered this morning," if I look up she wins.

"Okay, fine." It's like her voice is crossing its arms with indignation.

“Fine,” I’ve now read the same sentence three times.

“How long was your shower?”

“Jesus.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” she snaps. I’m now imagining her voice as an angry little cartoon like in Schoolhouse Rock with steam spitting from its ears and tapping its foot so violently it puts cracks in the ground. I really want to laugh. I read the sentence again.

“Well?”

“I don’t remember how long—”

“Exactly. You don’t remember because you didn’t use the timer like I told you.”

Five times. It’s a nice sentence but it’s getting old. I look up. I was right about her arms being crossed.

“Did you dust for prints or something?” When I first moved in last month, she made a strong point to make sure I would use the white plastic kitchen timer she tacked to the wall of the bathroom, just next to the shower. Though I was familiar with the concept of turning a knob to a desired time, I’d let her go into painstaking detail about her skewed science behind the seven-minute rule, and how this exact time frame saves some exact amount of water I’ve since forgotten.

“I didn’t have to, I can just tell.”

June was always a little nutty, just like the rest of my mom's side of the family, but she's still the one who'd best be described as 'normal' in comparison. The chinchillas were the one oddity she never grew out of. Mom would tell me stories of various things her sister said my cousin June had hoarded any given week when she was in middle school: Q-tips, Epsom salts, sugar-free organic gummies, detachable screwdriver heads, lab rats rescued from her father's pharmaceutical company. We never met until we were both in college back east, but she lived up to the image I had of her in my head. Unkempt auburn curls wrangled into strained hair ties, smatterings of freckles concentrated to her shoulders, alarmingly straight teeth, carefully esoteric obsessions. She wasn't the type you'd expect to live in a duplex in West Hollywood.

"You showered for well over your allotted seven minutes."

"Junebug, it's fine, we got a few inches last week so I'm sure an extra minute or so won't kill you." She hates that nickname. I just want to see steam come out her ears.

"It might endanger Simon and Garfunkel. You need to stop being so selfish."

Those two chinchillas have enough power to dictate the water usage of two semi-adult women. June's apparently done heaps of research on the dangers of chinchilla dehydration. According to her 'Cheeky Chinchillas' online group forum for chinchilla owners and enthusiasts, the weird rats cannot live in temperatures over 85 degrees or else they'll experience extreme dehydration resulting in stress diarrhea and environment-induced depression.

“The drought is over, June, Jerry Brown said so himse—”

“You can *never* be too sure,” she’s now wagging a finger in my face and I feel smaller than Paul Simon, “just because we’ve had a good month of rain does *not* mean we can go back to ten-minute showers, Eleanor.”

“I’ll move out.” I need to feel taller than Simon. I need to reach at least Garfunkel height to regain some pride. Besides, I was right. The drought was over; no more state of emergency.

“Where would you go?” she scoffs, “your parents moved up north and your school friends are all back east.”

“I have friends at work—”

“You’re freelance.”

“My car then.” This sounds like a good idea to me. I could join the odd line of RVs and trucks that appear along PCH. Maybe if I lived that close to the beach again I’d actually go.

“Where would you be able to take those luxurious, nine-minute showers of yours?”

“Okay, a hotel.” A hotel close to the beach, probably.

“Oh, you have money now? You got a raise from your editor? A new job offer? Did you finally get discovered by The New Yorker?”

“Fine, maybe the public showers by the beach. And The New Yorker doesn’t discover writers. The physical magazine isn’t walking around in a little top hat, knocking on doors of homes where it senses quality writing.”

“Oh don’t be a martyr, Eleanor, just take seven minute showers.”

“You honestly don’t think I can do this, don’t you?”

“You take luxuriously long showers! I hear you singing and I’ve seen the expensive scrubs you buy! You’re not one to *rough it!*”

I keep thinking ‘*Garfunkel height*’ over and over in my head before answering her.

“You re-wash the dishes once a day, how is that not wasteful?”

“I use the shower water I collect from my seven-minute showers.” She retorts, “besides, I only run the actual dishwasher when it is completely full.”

“It’s like I’m back in college and you’re the RA from hell.” I toss my book on the coffee table and trod towards my room. I’m not about to cave. I already made the mistake of eye contact, god forbid I give her or those damn chinchillas the upper hand.

“If you’re serious about this, you’d best pack up everything,” she calls down the hall after me. “Only if you’re serious, though.”

* * *

Angelenos love their cars and hate calling themselves ‘Angelenos.’ My car is a piece of shit I love it. It’s a 1999 Honda Accord in a lovely hue of forest green and I always found it comfortable because it has these tan leather seats that smell worn-in

when they've been sitting out in the sun for long enough. It's already not great to live in full-time. At least it has a moon roof.

LA boasts about its rainfall. Whenever we get over one eighth of an inch, news teams will bring out their full-team coverage, with Storm Watch 2017. They will send some poor overeager field reporter fifty paces from the studio door and she'll stand there wondering why she got her degree in journalism from USC and how she really thought it was a career based on intellect. She'll don the network poncho and stand outside and literally watch the rainfall on the cement. She'll do that for multiple minutes until a producer takes pity on her, which is usually after a gust of wind screws with the sound equipment. A pre-drought rain was cause for alarm and entertainment, mostly because no one can really drive in conditions that are anything but 75 and sunny. In the thick of it, a rain worthy of Storm Watch could be nothing more than a hundredth of an inch.

After gathering my bags I drive around West Hollywood until I somehow steer into Sunset. The traffic barely reacts; almost like the line of red taillights begin to make up the boulevard's perpetual smirk. I'm out of practice. I'm muttering to myself in my car, complaining about the traffic. I never did that when I still lived here, before I insisted I could hack it with East coast winters. Now I'm insisting I can hack it on my own back here, when the only family I have left out here is busying herself with glorified rats. Angelenos don't complain to themselves about beach traffic, they only

complain to others and often in larger groups at stagnant cocktail parties to get attention. I've tried going to those parties. I've tried mingling and slipping business cards into the hands of executive assistants like I'm greasing the palm of an all-too-powerful maitre d' and I'm just trying to get a table that isn't right next to the kitchen door, maybe a table where I can be seen by some of these editors and executives, but I'm stuck at the table in the back with the kitchen door steadily banging the back of my chair. I'm hungry.

I wind my way past Westwood and pull through the worst In-N-Out in town, ordering my #1 Animal Style from some UCLA undergrad with a dashed dream crumpled in her apron pocket. I'm remembering how, on road trips with my dad we would always stop for In-N-Out, and I would always bring up my desire to work there when I grew up because their uniforms have these gigantic safety pins that fasten the cherry red aprons. I keep driving and balance the to-go box on one knee. I rummage around for a fistful of fries to cleanse my palate, pre-burger. It's an art specific to California in which you must keep the Secret Sauce in the burger while simultaneously keeping your hands at the 10 and 2 position on the wheel.

I keep driving past my high school, still trussed up like a California mission with top-notch private security, maneuvering my way down into Santa Monica. I remember the house I grew up in, I remember my old neighborhood, and I decide to turn off Sunset for a few minutes and drive around trying to find the home. We had a lawn and

a white picket fence. We had flowers. Bushes of blooming flowers in yards and gardens, wildflowers peeked out of waist-high grasses in the freeway-clinging foothills along the Grapevine. I really want to see the grass because I miss green. Sure, the drought is over and there is snow in the mountains and lakes are fuller and rivers are running and places are greener. But the city itself is slow to react. Even though the water conservation rules were lifted, everyone is still treating the city like the next dust bowl, there's hardly any green.

California used to be green and there used to be water. But the longer I spend weaving around side streets in Santa Monica, LA proper feels less and less whole. Trees still stand bristling with leaves; grass patches on the medians of San Vicente Boulevard are sleepily shifting from gold to green now that the city is allowed to irrigate them with potable water without being slapped with a fine. People can technically wash their cars with an old fashioned garden hose that doesn't have some expensive shut-off nozzle. There were three tiers of rules that went into effect a couple years ago when the drought gained national attention. Newspapers would illustrate to the newly inducted conservationists using a description of three buckets: statewide, countywide, and the local neighborhood rules. All I can picture are the big, orange, one-gallon Home Depot buckets that permanently sit on the floor of June's shower. It became illegal to water a lawn to the point where water runoff pours into the gutter, and people were encouraged to call in the rule breakers and report them to the city.

June still sits at the front window every other morning to monitor the sprinklers, her phone lying in wait on the coffee table, and a chinchilla in each hand. No one is willing to relinquish their drought habits because no one in the entire city can see that it's over and no one is willing to drive beyond city limits to find the evidence themselves.

I'm suddenly oozing with memories of childhood camping trips and having to take the RV to dump the water tanks after the end of long weekends at Leo Carrillo or Malibu. We could fill the tanks at the water station in the campground at the start of a long weekend and relearning that "grey water" meant definitely not potable, and filling two different tubs to wash dishes instead of washing them under a running tap. That was when we had a front lawn and a pear tree and mom gardened and tended to flowers and herbs and tried to teach me the difference. Things were comfortable. That was when we would actually use sprinklers on a timer every other morning and no one was rationing and there weren't thousand-dollar fines if your neighbor deemed your water use "excessive."

Lining my old street are the same billowy evergreen trees, which I'm relieved to see still live up to their name. But then when I'm in front of the picket fence, I'm furious. My childhood home has fallen victim to xeriscaping. I've always hated the desert. There's something about giant cacti and gravel and adobe that piss me off and make me feel so uncomfortable. Instead of a lawn, this family who I'm assuming are terrible, have replaced any hint of grass with deliberately placed succulents, and weird

rubbery groundcover sectioned off with haphazard patches of gravel. All for the drought.

I pass more neighborhoods, each more naked than the last, following the road as the cars gather and disperse at the next available turn. My anxiety swells. Cactus prongs and decorative beige rocks build and build and the stubborn ones who can't afford to redo their landscape have let lush lawns die out and dirt takes over, sweeping away squares of turf leaving the occasional patch of burnt beige to flourish amidst dust and dog shit. I'm white-knuckled and turning my hands on the steering wheel until they squeak against the leather. I move with the Sunset Smirk until I hit PCH and I turn right. It's just reaching the golden hour, a truly horrible time to find yourself in beach traffic. Instead of hitting golden locks of sand-dipped hair in that perfect sans-filter aesthetic, the sun just rudely points to all the specs of dust and dirt on my windshield. The golden hour is going to be my new daily reminder that I'm out of wiper fluid.

I wait for a break in the oncoming traffic, and pull an extremely questionable u-turn into the beachside shoulder. The water should help me; the Pacific has helped me before. I loved the beach growing up, I rarely went even when I lived two miles away, but I loved it when it was convenient--namely when I left and would complain to everyone how the Atlantic is a shit ocean with shit beaches.

I stared out at the whitecaps. I like feeling relaxed, it's not a feeling I'm currently accustomed to. I roll down my windows and open the moon roof and I feel kind of

warm and I'm thinking I could shake this desert-uneasiness, I take my foot off the brake and loosen my legs. The car is not in park. I lurch forward into the bumper of a beat down pick-up truck. Grabbing my poor Honda by the emergency brake, I stop the car before more damage is done. This is the most at-home I've felt since moving back last month: my first instinct was to drive away.

"Oh shit!" A broad-shouldered man with hair longer and prettier than mine, who looks equally beat down, steps out of the truck to survey the damage.

Shit. I'm proving June right. Still fighting the urge to drive off, I force myself from the driver's seat and confront Brother Goldenhair.

"Sir, I'm so sorry, I was just staring at the water I didn't realize I forgot to put the car in park I feel like a moron I'm so sorry lemme get my insurance information do you want me to call AAA wait you need my license plate number—"

"It's chill, honest, it's just a car," he dusts off his hand on his tattered board shorts before extending it towards me. "I'm Kentaro." He shakes my hand and I feel the saltwater cracks in his palms.

"Cool name." The guy seems to have forgotten I just hit his car, so I owe him some conversation.

"I kinda made it up. My given human name is Kenneth."

"What changed?"

“I spent a summer in my formative years woofing in Maui,” he turns his head towards me and nods knowingly, “it was pretty dope. I had amazing experiences with locals, and they fed me so much poi and I just fell in love with it, ya know?” I’m clued in based on the fact that he’s a white man in his thirties prattling on about his love for Hawaiian ‘locals.’

“Yeah they thought it was so cool that I loved the poi so much cause it’s so weird looking, it’s the taro root pudding ya know, that they said I might’ve been born from it.”

“Oh, so you gave yourself the nickname.”

“It was bequeathed unto me by the poi. I added the ‘taro’ before I came back to reality. It’s a good reminder to stay grounded.”

Grounded in nothing, so it seems. “Got it. So, Kentaro, is there anything I can do about your truck? I feel awful.”

“You got distracted by the water, huh?”

I’m violently unsure where this conversation is going. He asks me what brings me to LA and I tell him that I grew up here, graduated college a few years ago, minimal prospects, moved back to LA to be what’s looking like a failing copy editor.

“Yeah, I got distracted by the water. It’s different from when I was little. Seriously, can I please give you my insurance—”

“So, how about this drought?” He was bound to bring it up at some point. Everyone does. Based on the layer of beach grime in his hair I could tell he was one of those unattached, unintentionally off-the-grid types who illegally collect rainwater in big orange one-gallon buckets.

“It’s over,” I’m gearing up for another argument, but he just keeps nodding so I continue, “Jerry Brown lifted the state of emergency a few weeks ago.”

“Yeah he’s a cool dude. Still can’t really tell a difference though. At least not here.”

“There used to be flowers,” I smile at him.

“Right! Like, everywhere! Have you seen a Super Bloom since you’ve been back? We’ve had a super wet winter but it kinda sucks, cause you can’t tell staying in town.”

“Yeah, people just drive like dicks in the rain, that’s the only symptom of a drought-free LA.”

“I’ve been meaning to go up, but my truck broke down here yesterday so I’ve kinda been living outta it. There’s a bloom up at Magu just up the road, that’d definitely make up for the little fender bender.”

The idea of green and of flowers and of home prompts my immediate approval of Kentaro’s plan. I start the car and the worn-in leather smell winds its way through the AC vents. I pull another U-turn out of the inlet and get back on PCH and crawl for

several minutes in silence until Kentaro finally gives in and begins futzing with the radio. The midday sun mocks the top of my head through the moon roof and we sit bumper-to-bumper for close to an hour. It's a Saturday at the beach, I shouldn't be so surprised, but I'm examining the cars around us and more and more have out-of-state plates. This isn't just beach traffic.

I stretch my legs with my seatbelt off and my window rolled down. Kentaro finds some incongruent jazz station likely run out of a local community college and turns the volume down to a suitable talking level.

"Traffic's gonna be like this for the next few hours," he yawns and follows suit, unclipping his seatbelt and stretching abnormally tanned legs, "You might wanna cut the engine." For at least the next few miles ahead of us, cars had just stopped.

Some police sirens interrupt the jazz and three squad cars fly down the shoulder of the road. I love the traffic but this is nearing post-apocalyptic. A text from June reverberates on the dashboard and I ignore it. She's likely assuming that I'm either dead or in a hotel room somewhere taking multiple nine-minute showers because she thinks I'm a "drought-apologizer" as she so gently and inappropriately put it. But the unexpected rainstorms we've gotten in the month since I've moved back are the only things that feel genuinely Los Angeles to me. I'd smile stupidly and stare out the living room window and watch the rain, remarking that 'petrichor' is both my favorite word

and my favorite smell. June would just call me names and reminded me that the drought isn't over just because it rained for a day.

"Oh, shit, you should turn the car back on," he astutely observes as the lane next to us begins to unclog and cars amble sleepily onwards. "It's a few more miles, should take us under an hour at this rate."

We churn slowly past El Matador State Beach, which I always used as the indicator we were close to Leo Carrillo when I was little and my family still camped. We pass the campsite turn-off and now I'm unfamiliar with this stretch of PCH. Whenever we went anywhere further north, we'd always cut from the 405 to the 5 and go past foothills when they were wavy and green.

"You're gonna wanna get in the right lane soon," he waves his hand over towards the other lane, and I painstakingly move over to hug the cliffs shrouded in litter. We've stopped again, and I see the next exit sign for Point Magu State Park.

"Turn off here," Kentaro whips off his mirrored sunglasses and points to a small turnoff carved in the canyon with a small trail scooped out and vanishing into an erosion in the bluffs. I park the car and lock it, pointedly looking at Kentaro, but he's distracted by the trailhead.

"Alright," he takes a deep breath in, and on his exhale exclaims. "This-a-way!"

I hate hiking. I always have. I've been tricked into it before and the results were never great, but I just severely don't care about the trail or the dust or the sweat or anything so I follow him. He's wearing Birks, so it can't be that bad.

In elementary school we learned the fifty states, but spent an entire month on California. The state bird is the California quail, and the state flower is the Poppy. I'd never seen either one in person, so I was starting to have deep doubts about the viability of Los Angeles private schools. But several switchbacks and a gentle incline later, we're greeted by a portal of wild orange poppies that run deep into a small finger of erosion up the hill, oozing out from the dust trail that cuts through them, self-conscious and highly aware how out of place it is. Everything around them is dead grass but there they are, floral exclamation points.

"This is not real," I'm stammering and trying to process what I'm seeing. There's never this much color. Seeing green trees back at college was my greatest freshman culture shock; I had lived for so long in beige and yellow-tinged neutrals, romanticizing dead grass in the foothills labeling them as rolling and golden.

"This is what happens after a wet winter," Kentaro is completely unfazed, "we get blooms. Hence the traffic," he looks at me, probably half expecting me to comment on his use of 'hence' but I'm still stuck in an expression between bewilderment and catharsis.

He continues, "It's pretty chill, huh?" I shush him because, save for the small handful of other people meandering delicately through the flowers, there's no real sound.

After many minutes I finally break. "This is wild," that's all I can think of. I sound moronic.

"Yeah, man" is his half-formed reply.

The quiet is suddenly consuming instead of comforting. I get another text from June telling me how it's okay for me to come home now, and she'll let me tack on one more minute to my shower time if I agree to a shower every other day. I take a few photos of the coy orange flowers on my phone.

"I could do this," I tell Kentaro.

"Do what?"

"Live out here," I left my pair in the car so I'm squinting at my own reflection in his cheap gas station sunglasses. "It's not like I have a job." I leave the statement out there to float around with the bleeding colors.

After several seconds, Kentaro breaks the silence. "Didja know that poppies die pretty quickly after they get picked? They can't survive just in water."

"That's morbid."

I stop scrunching and sit across the path from him, on another patch of weeds.

“Yeah, ‘freelance’ is heavily coded nowadays, you’re basically unemployed” he pushes his sunglasses through his hair until they sit glinting haughtily on top of his head.

“Right,” I turn my focus to ripping up weeds and blades of mostly-dead grass by my feet. I can feel his stare still fixed on my forehead. I unearth my phone from my pocket and scroll through June’s several dozen check-in texts. The most recent batch was just her one-sided bargaining, increasing my shower time by thirty-second increments. I would rather live with the poppies.

“I should drop you back off at the truck,” I scatter the shards of grass amongst the flowers, and turn around to pick one just to see what’ll happen.

* * *

The leather comfort smell of my car meets stale Secret Sauce and I breathe in exhaustion. I give a grateful wave to Kentaro, who’s resumed digging around under the hood of his truck, and pull another problematic maneuver, swinging the Honda back out onto PCH in between two unsuspecting cars and start the steady inch back towards the newly refurbished California Incline. Nearly 7 o’clock now, and I’ve only moved half a mile in the past hour. I’m remembering that I love the traffic. I actively love it. There’s something about quickly going nowhere amidst everyone else’s frustrations that’s settling.

I finally reply to June with one of my poppy photos, a kind of floral middle finger to really prove the end of the drought, and a text telling her I'll be home in an hour depending on traffic.

Half an hour later I'm still sitting on PCH. I watch the sun drown in the wet horizon, coughing up smears of warm color as it sputters and dies out behind the Pacific.

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