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Wanderlust

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wanderlust

a strong desire to travel

Skyler Gausney-Jones

John F. Kennedy Airport

The air is cold and uncomfortable.

I am cold and uncomfortable.

The sweat on my forehead, sucked out of my pores by the humid August afternoon, starts to dry, making my face feel stiff. Hundreds of New Yorkers are bustling around me; they are being New Yorkers. I hear quick moving, jangling keys, telephone conversations, and clicking dress shoes coming from all directions. Where is everyone going? Not nearly as far as I am, for that, I am sure. There is a man and a woman standing by the Delta Airlines check-in; he has his large, strong hand placed on her lower back, his thumb caresses it in a circular motion. She is wearing a knee-length blush pink dress that flares at the bottom and mint wedges, revealing ten French pedicured toes. They are waiting to check a bag while the airport attendant shifts over to help her colleague who can't find the confirmation number for the impatient family of five; but the couple isn't getting frustrated, they are happy. A thick gold band sits snug at the bottom of his ring finger. They are going to Maui.

"No, I told Paul to schedule my meeting for 3 o'clock," says a white-haired gentleman as he whisks past me. He smells like the strong aftershave that comes from our bathroom some mornings, as my father gets ready for work. I am going to miss that smell. The charcoal madison fit suit, exclusively woven for Brooks Brothers, hugs his body perfectly. His left hand is gripped tightly around a chestnut colored briefcase. He is going away on business, to Chicago perhaps.

It's now that I notice a woman of about 5'2" a few feet in front of me. She is holding

a white sign with orange lettering that spells out "Syracuse Abroad." That is where I have to go.

I cannot believe I'm doing this.

I start to feel faint.

What did I get myself into? I don't know any of these people. What if my host family doesn't like me? What if something happens to me? What if something happens to my family while I am away? Oh my god.

I'm trying to keep my face as nonchalant as possible. If my parents see that I'm worried, we'll be back in the car and on the way home in no time. They don't want me to go, especially my mom. She thinks I'll get homesick, call her crying, start to stress out, end up lost, kidnapped, dead, who knows. I want to reassure her that I'll be fine, but I don't even know if that's true.

I hate being home alone yet I'm going to Europe for four months, by myself.

Jesus Christ.

"I'll be right back, I have to use the bathroom." My family slides over to hold my place in line.

I turn the faucet on until it's as cold as it can get and place my hands beneath the running water. I hold small pools of it in my cupped hands, pat my face down, and then glance up into the mirror.

I see a girl. She is wearing a short, jean dress with white polka dots. She has her hair pulled back into a ponytail and her face is bare. A look of uneasiness echoes from her being, but there is fire in her eyes. Her Syracuse backpack pulls her shoulders down; she's carrying such great weight, on her back, in her mind, and in her heart. No one is with her but she knows she'll be okay. She



knows that everything she's ever wanted is just on the other side of fear. She is going to Madrid. The girl is me, and this is the craziest thing I've ever done, but I kind of like it.

Momma

Trying to distract herself from crying, she asks, "Where is your passport? Do you have a sweater? It's going to be cold on the plane. Call me as soon as you land." She just doesn't want to say goodbye. I hug her tightly and I can hear her snuffle; my god do I love her.

My eyes stay fixated on the black lines on the floor because I know that if I look up, I'll see the rest of my family watching from a

distance, eyeballs glazed with tears. "Ma'am, you have to keep walking, you can't stand here," I hear an airport attendant bellow from about fifteen feet away. I start walking towards the group of unfamiliar faces and turn around to give her the same half-smile and obnoxious wave I've been giving her since the first day she dropped me off at school in second grade. "See ya later momma!" I yell, and she smiles, right before burying her face into my grandma's shoulder; I know she is crying now.

Security is giving me a hassle as always, convincing me that they all hate their jobs, patting me down for weapons, drugs, and a bunch of other things I don't have. I've been

standing here for nearly twenty-five minutes and I'm starting to grow impatient, but it's helping me keep my mind off of my distressed mother who I know is still watching me.

"Take your belt off please and walk through again."

I toss my belt into the plastic bin. Finally, the light is no longer red. Green, go.

I'm on the other side of the gate now, about to travel eight hours away from my home, to a country where English isn't the native language. My anxiety is starting to gain on me.

Take Off

"In case of emergency, oxygen masks will drop down in front of you." Blah, blah blah. I lean back and close my eyes. My neck muscles tighten and my ears pop; we're off. "Well, here goes nothing," I whisper, and then I dive. I dive into uncertainty for the first time in my life.

Cenar

Luisa Gordillo Gonzalez. She is my host mom. She lives alone in a grand apartment on the corner of Pilar Millan Astray 2. I've never seen her without makeup on or dressed in anything that a typical seventy-year-old grandma would wear. Her wardrobe consists of fancy dresses and bedazzled sandals, diamond bracelets, and pearl earrings. Her five grandkids come over on Friday afternoons and she cooks them lunch; Friday's are the best days of her week.

Every night around nine, she cooks me dinner. I never know what she's whipping up in there, but there hasn't been a time that

she's made me something I didn't like...except gazpacho of course. I hate gazpacho; it's thick, cold, chunky texture is enough to make me sick to my stomach. Tomatoes have never been my fruit of choice, so trying to slurp down cold, spicy tomato soup is a big no no for me.

"Quieres cenar?" she'll yell from the kitchen at 8:58pm. I don't know why she always asks. I'd never turn down any of her meals and she knows I love to eat. I informed her of my greediness the first day I arrived. "Me gusta comida," I randomly said one night at the dinner table. I'm bad at starting conversations, even worse in another language. She laughed, and since then, I've been leaving the kitchen as stuffed as a Thanksgiving turkey.

The kitchen is a bright orange color with white and black tiles lining the floor. The table is glass and the chairs are cushiony. She leaves the window cracked open so that the warm European air can circulate; it creates



the perfect balance. Fresh air mixed with spices and warm bread; it is delightful.

First comes soup or salad. I usually go for the salad. She dresses it nicely with a sprinkle of salt, a dash of olive oil, and a splash of vinegar. Then comes the entrée, my favorite. Spaghetti con bacon, pollo, tortilla, paella, pescado, she constantly mixes it up, rarely giving me the same dish twice in one week. For dessert, she'll reach over to the freezer and pull out a box of vanilla and chocolate ice cream bars. By this time, I am normally full but I always take one. Sometimes, she gives me fruit; sweet, soft melon and kiwi.

We don't speak much at dinner. Mostly because she doesn't know any English and the last time I took a Spanish course was in eleventh grade. She'll ask me how my day was and I'll try to formulate a response she'll be able to understand before reciprocating the question. Sometimes, we just eat with our heads in our plates. I'll glance up when I think she isn't looking, and I can feel her do the same when she thinks I'm not looking. When our eyes meet, we both burst out in laughter. It's like we are children playing peek-a-boo, and for some reason, I don't find it awkward; I don't think she does either. Occasionally, she'll tell me a story; that of which I can only pull out a few words.

"Entiendes?" she'll ask about half way through.

"Sí, sí." She catches on eventually; I have no idea what she is saying.

We've both become accustomed to the mutual preference for silence; it's just easier that way. I'll sit and listen to her dentures clank around in her mouth and the clicking of her long fingernails against the fork. She always finishes before me but never leaves

the table until I have eaten the last portion of whatever delicious meal she's prepared. "Muchas gracias," I'll say as I scoot my chair back away from the table. "De nada guapa!" she replies and back to my room I go, content and full.

Metro Sainz de Baranda

I take the metro to school every day. If I leave the house at approximately 8:45am, I'll get there by 9:17am, giving me exactly thirteen minutes to indulge in a café con leche and chocolate croissant before my first class.

To get to the station, I have to turn right at the first stop sign, and then make my way through a short back alley. I tend to speed up at this point. It's eerie back there at night, but my professor told us that Madrid is one of the safest places to live. I believe her. Sometimes, I hear rustling in the bushes so I try to stay in the middle of the walkway. My heart speeds up, only to be reassured as the squirrel jumps out onto the rail. When I get to the end, I'm welcomed onto the busy street by children in uniforms, parents rushing to work, and autobuses beeping their horns; a sense of relief washes over my body.

I have to pass the churro truck parked on the corner right before I reach my destination. The older couple that runs it brings me joy, giving me a warm smile and wave with sugar dusted fingers as soon as they see me emerge.

The man is in charge of handling the giant pot of hot oil, delicately placing each churro inside, taking them out once their cream color turns a golden brown.

His wife stands on the opposite side, her hands artfully working the dough, making it



just the right size to fit into the machine that molds it into its cylindrical shape. I can taste the gooey inside and the thin, crunchy exterior. I imagine dipping it in the cup of decadent, melted chocolate, but I have to keep walking; they don't open until noon.

Sainz de Baranda reads the sign above the escalator that leads to the mysterious underground world. You never quite know what's going on down there.

There is a blue line, green line, red line, purple line, yellow line, and orange line. I take the red, the number 6 train. I get off at the fourth stop, Avenida de America, and then take the number 7 train, the orange line, which brings me to Gregorio Maranon where Instituto Internacional, my school, is.

The Madrid metro is clean compared to New York's subways. I've yet to see a roach run across the platform, a mouse nibble on garbage below the tracks, or smell the foul stench of urine. Although there is one man I see all the time. His rubbery, dry skin scattered with indentations makes me think he's been severely burned. "No tengo dedos y no puedo trabajar," he'll say as he pushes through crowds of anti-morning people; he doesn't have fingers and he can't work. Everyone ignores him; we have fingers and we can work.

People-watching is how I pass the time both to and from school.

I entertain myself by creating imaginary lives for everyone in my head, sometimes even dialogue since I can't understand what they're actually saying. Other times, I'm just curious. I wonder where she works. What is

that book about? How old is that kid over there doing last minute homework? What's his family like? I wonder if he had a chance to eat breakfast this morning. That girl looks like she bosses her boyfriend around. I bet that old man with the shabby beard smells like peppermints and tobacco. I'm in my own little world but never forget to remain aware of my surroundings. People who pickpocket prowl over us like owls on mice. They're disguised as ordinary locals, but are far from it. If I were to lose something, momma can't do much to help me from her apartment in Briarwood. Actually, I'm not even sure I'd need her help. I'd say I'm getting pretty good at this whole 'independent' thing.

From 8:45 to 9:17, I am on the train; this thirty-two minute journey is the best part of my day.

Parque de Retiro

The humming of the wave-song beguiles me. Boats float by with an occasional splash from the rowers' heavy wooden paddles. I sit with my butt pressed against the cool cement steps descending from the statue of King Alfonso XII and look out into the picturesque view.

The sun is setting into a hole in the sky; one that resembles a deep cut that only a butterfly bandage can close. I watch as it heals, leaving me in the darkness and welcoming my family, occupying another time zone, into the light. When I squint my eyes hard enough, I can make out people on the other side of the lake, roller-skating, biking, and out for evening jogs; the sun, that luminous medallion in the sky scorches us during the day, preventing such leisurely activities.

There is a woman to the left of me unpacking her violin from the case. She says something in Spanish to all of the people in the area who are now her audience. With the dulcet melody resonating from the small instrument, I close my eyes. I think about how much I love being here. This time with myself is something that I've never had before. This time with myself is allowing me to figure out the things that have never made sense. I am freed from the chaos and all of the small things that caused me tremendous stress in the past.

I peel my eyes back open and everything is blurry. Rubbing my crunchy eyelashes, coated with a thin layer of mascara, things start to refocus. I peer down at my phone. Shit. Luisa called me twice. It's 9:21pm. I jump up and toss two euros in the case of the violinist and start running back down the wide streets of my neighborhood. The wind makes my eyes water and all I can do is laugh.

They say that if you travel far enough, you meet yourself. I am free and I am finally me.

Pink Luggage

It's December 15th, 2016 and here it is; everything that has composed my life for the last four months packed away in three measly suitcases. My portrait sketched diligently by a street artist in Italy, my tote from London fashion week, my Eiffel Tower keychain given to me by a homeless man in the train station in Paris, my paintings from the abstract art museum in Cuenca, my worn out vintage shoes bought from a market in Valencia, hundreds of dollars in European clothing that can't be found in the United States,

faded tickets from Real Madrid games, free chupito flyers, a map from the Alhambra in Granada, postcards from Museo Sorolla, leather bracelets with Firenze engraved in them, my gold dangling elephant earrings from Mercado de San Miguel, and Moroccan tea. Now if only I could pack Luisa and Madrid in there too, deep down in my neon pink American luggage.

I hear a short beep come through my window from the street below. My taxi is here. I take one last deep breath in and when I let it out, tears come with it. I turn towards my door and Luisa is standing there.

"Dios mio guapa," she says as she holds my head in the nape of her neck. It takes me a few seconds to gather myself before I can speak. "No quiero irme. Me encanta Madrid y me divertí mucho."

"Entiendo y espero que vengas pronto. Se que volveras, eres feliz aqui." I smile. "Por supuesto! Muchas gracias por todos." She grabs my hand and one of my bags that is much too heavy for a seventy-year-old woman to carry, and we head downstairs. Her friend sees us struggling when we get to the front door of the building and immediately runs over. All of my things are stuffed into the trunk within two minutes. It's really happening now. Luisa and I look at one another because we know what comes next. She kisses me on both cheeks and wipes my tears with her gown. "Te vere pronto guapa." "Te vere pronto guapa!" I say back and we both laugh like we're back upstairs at the dinner table. I want to tell her that I'll never forget her, but I don't know how to say that. I get in the car and look through the window. She blows me a kiss and waves with both arms. I just know I'll see her again; I have to.