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Nicole Miller

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By: Nicole Miller

Unidentified Wandering

EVERY DAY, EVERYWHERE, HAS ITS SUNSET.

I've watched the Barbie-pink circle linger in the summer sky for nearly an hour before it finally gets dark. In some July, I sat on the stone steps in my backyard at 8:00 P.M. in warm daylight. Some purples in the sky hinted otherwise, and across the street parents were probably getting their little kids ready for bed, but I remember feeling like I had so much day ahead of me.

Four months later. I sit at my computer in London in November; it is around 11:26 P.M. and it has been dark for at least seven hours. In mid-afternoon the sun casts colorful shadows across the dirty sky until just past 4:00 when the city turns black. I forget time when that happens. I feel wasted in a day too short for me. Too short for what I want to accomplish. The sunset happens so fast I can't even appreciate its beauty. It rushes itself along, unnoticed, like all of the cold pedestrians hustling through each other, on a collective mission towards warmth.

That October, I was in Greece. I sat on a white stonewall in Santorini, and watched what I'd heard advertised as the most beautiful sunset in the world. *This is Impression Sunrise for real. Where did Monet paint that?* It was an orange globe in a rich blue sky, imitated clumsily by the ocean below. It was fleeting. The *Impression Sunrise* sunset. I'm actually lucky I caught it as I looked up from my writing. The moment rushed by so quickly. I wished the sky had a pause button so I could stare indulgently. Then again, the collage in my head produced memories of more colorful sunsets. More beautiful perhaps.

Two days later I was in the dark again, on a ferry from Santorini to Athens. I climbed out a heavy white door onto a slippery white deck. Small lamps lit the wetness under me, and I slowly slid my way to a dry plastic chair. I brought it to the rail. I sat down and looked toward the sea. In a skyless, bottomless pocket of black, the boat was the only color. That and the white water that surrounded us and followed us; the white cloud that we surfed through the night.

Seventy percent of the world is water. Ninety percent of the human body is water. Anything visceral is fluid. Inspiration, hope, fear. I once was given the following advice: *you've had a tsunami of epiphany. the wave will recede. don't forget this feeling. and know it will wash over you again. courage is action in spite of your fear (when the wave recedes)*. A month before this advice reached my ears, I looked out on an ocean and I searched for visceral reassurance.

*“Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.”*

William Shakespeare

Athens is said to be the birthplace of thought. I sat on the Acropolis and took in the panorama of a built up, congested Athens below. What if there was still a city in these ruins ... *Ivory wasteland. Marble and dirt. This place is majestic but the “sluttish time” that's withered it reminds me how fleeting everything is. This is the skeleton of a city. A fossil of an era. What remains of worth? No ideas, no memories, just marble bone.*

Escape. There's a desperation implied there. With it, a suggestion of no return.

My tongue has wrapped around new noises imperfectly for ten years. Six of them were busy, I learned French four days a week. The last four years have been in standstill. My lazy lips don't attempt the fluid cohesion of French words. Instead, the sporadic phone call to an old classmate will incite a, *“Tu me manques, je t'aime. A bientôt mon ouiseau!”* I miss you, I love you. Later gator. Well technically, “soon my bird,” but in English that doesn't rhyme.

I have friends who have lived in Paris. Lived in Provence. They teach me colloquialisms. They tell me about fashions, music, pastries, people. They paint me a Paris to honor clichés.

In high school my French textbooks taught us about France. They taught us about *croques monsieurs* and Edith Piaf.

I was finishing my first full month in Europe before even considering traveling to Greece. So I figured I'd try something "familiar" first.

My first Parisian meal was a *croque monsieur* in a restaurant that had been alternating between Craig David and Usher, then suddenly played *La Vie en Rose*. I heard the chirpy trill of Edith Piaf's voice over a din of clanking wine glasses and the classic French "eeuuuh" between other diners' words. I saw myself as sixteen years old sitting in my French classroom with my friend who laughed hysterically at Edith's shrill vibrato as our teacher played it to us through muffled speakers. Then I looked through the cigarette smoke around me, and remembered time had passed, and I wasn't eating the classic French sandwich to classic French music in my French classroom. I was in Paris where the kitsch of it all wasn't and couldn't be the same.

Internet is a burden to vacationers. A constant connection to the stresses and obligations of the life we're trying to separate ourselves from. I rebel against myself when I'm away, the Internet is my worst enemy and I'm glad when my cell phone won't work. In my sanctuary of separation, I escape.

Kob Khun sum rup aban. Thank you for breakfast.

I was a teenager still daydreaming about my semester abroad. Visiting Vivi was the first time I'd been overseas since I was five.

The dark wooden dining room was separated from the kitchen by a sliding glass door. Through it the Amranands' servant, P'Chuen, brought me and Ted fresh squeezed orange juice, toast and eggs. She brought Vivi porridge—soupy rice with dried fish on top. Ted and I kept saying "Thank you," to the juice refills, new plates of toast; fully aware we weren't being understood. So once again my tongue was made to roll over r's and cut consonants harshly in a very un-American way. My Thai was crude and probably equally as incomprehensible to P'Chuen as my English, but my attempts every morning made her smile.

Hua-Hin is a city where monkeys run through streets like squirrels. I had looked forward to seeing the monkeys for days before I got there. They

chase each other up trees and under parked cars.

Two American teenagers and their Thai friend stood in separate lines for tickets to the Palace. The massive property stretched across a mountain. Women with broomsticks perched on various paths to scare away the monkeys that sometimes chased the tourists. An old room of one of the observatories had been converted into a gift shop, full of coconut clocks and wooden owl-shaped tissue dispensers. The other rooms of the palace were mostly empty. There wasn't much furniture anywhere, and hardly any tourists. Only the surrounding trees were full . . .

Of monkeys.

Lots of Americans say, "I've never left the country, except for Canada."

I'm cultured. Exposed. I have friends from Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, the Philippines, Germany, Brazil, Spain, Poland, Thailand, France. Seeing Thai people, French people, Greek people, English people, Scottish people, even New Yorkers or New Englanders in context, is a different kind of exposure. The shutter speed changes and perspective is open longer, the exposure lasts some instants more, and the memories it makes are more too.

In my small hometown in Massachusetts there are authentic Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indian, French, Italian, Moroccan, Mediterranean, Greek, Tibetan, and Latin restaurants. Yet only three percent of Americans have passports.

I've lived in Massachusetts for sixteen years. I know my way through my hometown. The neighboring towns are more complicated. And though I'm content in a radius, I let myself venture those few miles more every once in a while. Like it will expand my feeling of home. Or something.

I live with the liberal educated elite. This elite is not necessarily wealthy, most likely they are adult hippies who, in their passion against the man, have become professors at one of the five colleges that are all within a fifteen minute drive of one another.

My hometown was also voted the best small town for the Arts in 2003. It's a weekend destination for people who live in the countryside or farmland. It is a busy city with only one main drag that I could navigate blindfolded. I worked in a boutique one summer where weekenders treated themselves to new sundresses. They'd ask me to recommend a restaurant for lunch and

more often than not they'd pop back into the store the next day to find out what was good for dinner. I always knew what to suggest.

I lived in London for four months. I still can't picture the city's layout. To me it is tube stops and tourist landmarks. I could navigate from the Notting Hill Gate tube to Holborn station blindfolded. From St. Paul's to the Globe. Portobello Road. But I can't walk most of that city. I don't know street names and I can't recommend too many restaurants. But I explored what I could, and I can recommend what I know, and I itch for the day I can go back and wander just a little farther.

I don't know my heritage. My ancestors all moved to America from places my relatives can't entirely label. If I ever wanted to explore my ancestry, I don't know much about where I'd go.

I know where some came from: my grandfather was Hungarian. I know that, but I never knew him. On my way to Greece, I sat in a sleep-deprived daze in the Budapest airport feeling like I should perform some sort of homage in my grandfather's memory. I looked around the terminal at the Hungarian passengers, and wondered if somehow, they were my distant cousins. They probably weren't, but I would never know either way.

I had a great-great grandmother who was Moroccan, but Americans are advised to stay out of Morocco at present.

I had family who were Russian, but I don't think they were purely Russian; I think they just lived there.

So I travel on my own terms. I travel to visit friends, to honor stories I've learned, to satisfy curiosity about somewhere obscure. I've never traveled to find out my history. I learn about myself in other ways.

Yet despite my mixed heritage, to the outside world I'm just another American. An over packed, noisy, tall American, obtrusively navigating their streets. All I'm missing are binoculars and a Hawaiian-print shirt? When did vacationer become tourist?

Suitcases are quite different than they used to be. People carry more now,

even though they're not as strong as they once were. Muscle is aesthetic and so is strength. People only lift their bulging suitcases to show that they can. So mostly, we roll.

If I've learned one thing from traveling, it's that the actual act of it is easier than it seems. I've also learned the glamour of posters advertising famous destinations often misinform. Being in a new place is infinitely different than reading about it, looking at pictures or even talking to a Native out of context.

I am a native of nowhere. Most people living in cosmopolitan countries are.

I'm in the expanse of an ocean, I could be anywhere. And the sun above is anywhere too. And as it sets, I forget time. My cell phone service is dead, my heavy suitcase wheels locked, my passport tucked inside my purse, and I imagine escaping, never returning home. But the more places I visit and the more places I live, I find home is simply a feeling. Home is people. Unconditional comfort and unexpected laughter. Home is something worth returning to, and worth expanding. The boat propels forward. The wave of imagination recedes. §