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**SHELLEY, FLAUBERT & PAIN AU CHOCOLAT:**

**NOTES ON MY EUROPEAN EDUCATION**

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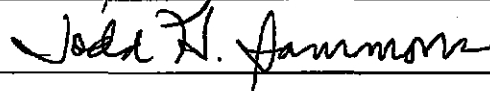
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We certify that we have read this thesis and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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## Contents

CHAPTER 1	1
<i>Navigator Girl Goes to College</i>	
Loire Valley, France	
CHAPTER 2	12
<i>Cafes, Dogshit &amp; Lung Cancer du Jour</i>	
Paris	
CHAPTER 3	21
<i>Chocolate &amp; Spaghetti</i>	
Italy	
CHAPTER 4	45
<i>Mon Amie, Chloe</i>	
Blois, France	
CHAPTER 5	50
<i>When I Die, I Want to Go to Harrod's</i>	
London	
CHAPTER 6	60
<i>A Book, a Rose, and an Almost-Married Man</i>	
Barcelona	
CHAPTER 7	69
<i>Cultural Anthropology and Six-pack Sex</i>	
Interlaken, Switzerland	
CHAPTER 8	76
<i>Au Revoir, L'Abbaye</i>	
Home	
Epilogue	80

*“The world is a book and those who do no travel read only one page.”*

*St. Augustine*

*“Certainly, travel is more than seeing the sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.”*

*Miriam Beard*

*“I grew up in Europe, where the history comes from.”*

*Eddie Izzard*

## CHAPTER 1

### *Navigator Girl Goes to College* Loire Valley, France

I saw a flyer one day outside of the registrar's office. It was omelete-yellow with a sketch of an old church on the cover. "*Have you ever wanted to study in France?*" it asked, as if speaking to me. The details enticed: *live in a thousand-year-old Abbey, quaint village, Loire Valley, vineyards, chateaux country, French immersion, English-speaking classrooms.* I could hear playing in my head the soundtrack of *Amelie*, heavy with accordions.

I had always wanted to go to Paris, sit in a smoke-filled cafe, and look worldly. I longed to have a passport crinkled with use, smudged blue and red with foreign stamps. I wanted to smell foreign earth. Eat foods with unpronounceable names.

I guess life just sort of got in the way: work, bills, lease agreements. British teenagers usually take what is called a "gap year," right after high school and before college. They strap on a backpack, live in youth hostels. It seemed I had missed my opportunity. And then at the age of thirty-two I saw that yellow flyer.

I had spent the previous ten years in California—Los Angeles specifically. I had loved most of my life in L.A. The weather was all that I imagined it would be—glaring sunshine, clear skies most days, warm climate. The air was filled with the

smells of jasmine, money, desperation. Tank tops and flip-flops dominate the wardrobe. The nights got cool, requiring a small sweater.

I moved to L.A. from Houston to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I wanted to be an actress. I spent years taking acting classes, theatre history seminars, auditioning for commercials, doing plays, and getting nowhere. I did one low-budget, independent movie, my only claim to “semi-fame.” But I also had a lot of fun. I got to see live bands at the famed Whisky-a-Go-Go. I befriended the Red Hot Chili Peppers (No groupie stories here; we worked out at the same gym), and I went to clubs on the Sunset Strip: the Viper Room and the Roxy. There were fantastic parties catered by world-renowned chefs, dinner with movie stars, and Vegas on weekends. I would recommend it to anyone in their twenties. But the older I became, the more vapid the “L.A. life” seemed to become for me. I wasn’t the stereotypical aspiring actress. I didn’t drink or take drugs and had no desire to meet Hugh Hefner. By the time I left L.A., I was no longer interested in acting or film but instead had fallen in love with books and writing; I was looking for more meaning in my life, something I could be proud of.

I also got tired of the “odd jobs”—waitressing, delivery driver, health club worker. I rented various apartments and duplexes over the years, all expensive, and not worth what I paid for them. Even with my parents’ ongoing help, the idea or dream of buying a house in a good neighborhood seemed unimaginable. I wanted a life I could touch. I needed \$500,000 to a million dollars for a “fixer-upper,” and I was getting frustrated by the wanting and not having.

And then an opportunity presented itself. I was looking into going back to school but was having problems with credit transfers and scheduling work and school. In a five-minute conversation with my mom, everything changed.

“I know you would *never* consider living in Mississippi again, but Dad is friends with the president of the university here. Do you want him to see what he can do?”

It was something I never thought I would do but I said “yes, *please.*” I had just ended a relationship, my apartment lease was up for renewal, my mom and I had repaired our fractured relationship—everything just seemed to be saying *take this opportunity.*

I was going to move home, to Mississippi where my parents had retired, and go back to college.

It was Thomas Wolf who said you can’t go home again; it’s not that you can’t go home exactly but that you left home for a reason. I left the South because I wanted something different. Growing up I was awkward and inquisitive, and I had greater dreams than to settle down and stay in Texas. Even in high school and attending college the first time in Mississippi, I always felt that I didn’t belong there. It was as if I were painted green, that I was somehow a little bit different; perhaps not overtly noticeable to them, but it was blaringly obvious to me. I wanted to explore. I wanted to live a bigger life.

I have always joked that I don’t have any Southern blood, trying to explain the alienation that I have always felt with the region. Whatever Southern blood I may

have had in me prior to California seemed to completely disappear on my return. I had seen things, met people from all over the world, flown in private jets; I even dated a Jewish lawyer (very exotic in my part of the South). I certainly had a different perspective now; a wider point of view. It was no longer me thinking I was different; I had become different.

During my first semester at The University of Southern Mississippi, I observed my fellow students while I sat in an algebra class. They looked like they had led pretty hard lives, their eyes full of worry and discontent, many were single mothers; others were blue-collar workers attending college because of workman's comp. settlements. Some of my classmates worked part-time jobs at Wal-Mart and Academy. Everyone looked years beyond their actual ages. People in Los Angeles, or more specifically, the people I knew, led pretty great lives. They looked great, smelled great, and had never really experienced "hard times" in the same way that my classmates in south Mississippi did.

The crystallization of these differences occurred in a philosophy class. Somehow the topic of Harry Potter came up and a fellow student, a woman about my age, began to speak, "I would never let my kids read those devil-worshipping books!"

As I noticed nods of agreements from many of my classmates, I realized *these were not my people*; I was in a different world. To me, what was a book, one that was getting children excited about reading, to my classmates was blasphemous. I had to recalibrate, take a step back: I was back in the Deep South, the Bible Belt.



I read in the paper that Harrison County had more churches than almost any other community in Mississippi. I used to take the back country roads to campus, over the railroad tracks and past the many modular homes decorated lovingly with home-made porches and hanging ferns. Sometimes cars in various states of disrepair would dot the lawn. As I passed these on the way to class, I would marvel at the letter boards on each church: *You can save at Wal-mart but you can get saved here; The best vitamin for a Christian—B1; Fire Safety—Stop, drop and roll won't work in HELL; Exercise Daily—Walk with the Lord.*

I never made one friend at school. I kept my opinions to myself, “made nice,” and smiled as I passed classmates on campus. I knew we would have nothing to talk about.

And then I saw that flyer. It was not only a way to continue school away from Mississippi, it also afforded me a long held opportunity to travel and live in another country: France, and I didn't know it then but it would change the entire trajectory of my life.

\* \* \*

My journey to France started in New Orleans, a forty-five minute drive from our house near the Mississippi Gulf Coast. My mom dropped me off at Louis Armstrong Airport, loaded down with bags and my newly issued passport. She was the perfect mixture of happy and sad as I hugged her goodbye.

“Have a *great* time, darling.”

I was living a bit of my life for her also. She grew up extremely poor in south Alabama, and she took great satisfaction from the fact that her daughter could live such a life. This too was part of our sometimes adversarial relationship. We fought over money: her need to give it, to thrust it on me, and then her need to make me feel guilty with every new car, diamond ring, mink coat. I am the version of her that she was never able to be.

The plane ride to Paris was my first transatlantic flight, my first trip abroad. The next twenty-four hours became a blur of time changes, train rides, and Ny-quil induced, groggy plane sleep. The group of us arrived at the Abbey, needing food, sleep, and a bath.

*L'Abbaye* (the Abbey) is in *Pontlevoy*, a tiny village in the chateaux and wine country of the Loire Valley. It is about an hour and a half southwest of Paris via the *TGV* (the French train.) It was built in 1066 and operated as a hospital during both world wars. It now houses American students and professors itching to experience another way of life.

There were fifty students attending; forty-two girls and eight guys. The University of Southern Mississippi ran the program, so most of the students were from schools in the South—North Texas, USM, College of Charleston. We got our room assignments and walked up the eighty-eight steps to the living quarters, with cement-heavy luggage. These steps, literally eighty-eight large slabs of winding

stone, over the next three months, kept our legs in shape and caused us shortness of breath, sometimes followed by cussing.

Here I was, thirty-three, about to be “dorm mates” with a total stranger. I was absolutely terrified that it would be a disaster; that perhaps I was too old, but I got lucky with Audrey. She reminded me of a flamingo; beautiful and quirky. Audrey was from Grosse Pointe, Michigan and only a few years younger than me. It was while we were unpacking and making small talk that she said, “Do you mind if I fart?” I looked up, she was beaming, I said, “no,” and chuckled. And then the rudest noise I have ever heard came from this pretty and petite girl. We both fell into hysterical laughter. Although it was unspoken; we would be attached at the hip from here on out.

\* \* \*

*Pontlevoy* is an unassuming village in the French countryside. The streets are narrow and winding. The color palette of the village is composed of flat earthen tones—lots of muted grays and ocre. The buildings are made of stones or heavy blocks carved from the insides of local caves. There is a subdued feeling to the village, a darkness, a lack of flash or pretense. It would be hard to find even a splash of color or vibrancy, a red sign, a bright yellow door. This is not an area where any one thing stands out—it is a collection of buildings, houses, and people living harmoniously. Everything looks old, ancient. Not old in a dilapidated way, but in a

marvelous, I-am-walking-back-through-time sort of way. Life seems simpler here. Cell phones are few, and most houses do not have internet access. People here go to the local café, *Le Commerce*, and talk face to face. It is a salt-of-the-earth-town, a town that smells of fresh mud and growing trees, of thriving life. The automobiles are small enough to maneuver around the tiny streets.

The streets of *Pontlevoy* are lined with black and white photos. The townspeople voted to erect a street museum in the form of photos mounted to the stone wall that frames the main walking street. Dates, names, and occupations accompany the pictures. I see these photographs when I walk to the *pâtisserie* in the mornings. I wake early to go get an *éclair*, or a *pain au chocolat* and a coffee before class. I had never had *pain au chocolat* before coming to France, and want to kiss its inventor—two tiny strips of bittersweet chocolate wrapped in airy croissant dough—brilliant! The photos depict citizens of the village from centuries past; grainy, smileless, and proud faces stare back at me as I pass. It reminds me of where I am and the history of this village, this country.

It's been a few weeks and I have settled into a routine. My favorite part of the morning is saying hello to the old woman who owns the *pâtisserie*. The bell over the door jingles as the door is pushed open. The smell of freshly baked pastry almost knocks you down and fills you up at the same time.

"*Bonjour*," I say, making sure to go "up" on the "*bon*" part and down on the "*jour*." "*Bonjour*," she singsongs back to me with a proud smile on her face. The treats are displayed like pieces of art or rare jewels in shiny glass cases with proper

lighting to show off the brilliant colors. Strawberries, apples, raspberries, cooked and glazed, ready to be bitten into and savored. The breads baked with love and butter, glistening in the light, their crusts showing perfect homemade imperfections. I point at what I want, while trying to use some bastardized French. *Madame* smiles and puts my breakfast in a small white bag.

I walk two doors down to *Le Commerce*, and have my morning coffee, and eat my pastry. The Abbey is located right across the road from *Le Commerce*. It is the biggest building in the village and has the most land. It is gated with vast medieval iron like a fancy boarding school. One floor is dedicated to living quarters and another is used for classrooms. The majority of the Abbey goes unused. The first week we arrived, we had a tour of the massive grounds, old horse stables, and refurbished church. It is the most intricately carved interior of a church I have seen: master craftsmanship, deep reds and purples inlaid in the stained glass windows, ceilings accented with dark flying buttresses. Its massive steeple cuts through the sky.

I am taking French 101, so I can at least say hello to the local shopkeepers, and order food at restaurants. I am also taking a course in French history and culture, which is both fascinating and exotic to me. *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. It seems after my tenure in France I will be an expert on the French Revolution, Napoleon, and the history of wine making, according to my syllabus reading list and lecture series. I have also been introduced to *Madame Bovary* and am becoming familiar with Shelley:

*like a swarm of golden bee; I smile as the words trill and dance over my tongue: as still as a brooding dove.*

Other than my classes, we will take field trips to the local châteaux in the area, neighboring cities of *Blois* and *Amboise*, where Leonardo da Vinci is buried in the Chapel of St. Hubart after his death in 1519, and a visit to a nearby French Resistance museum. Trips are also planned to a local vineyard, a goat cheese farm, and Paris for a week of instruction. The cafes will be our classrooms, as well as museums, and walking lecture tours.

Yesterday a French Resistance fighter came and gave a talk. I had heard nasty jokes in the past, usually from my grandfather's generation about there *really* being a French Resistance? And I had laughed along, but our guest assured me that there was a faction of Frenchmen that stayed strong and fought with all of their might to keep France from falling to the Nazis. *Monsieur Legier* was an old man, withered and small. He was very animated as he spoke of the Germans.

"I killed a man with my bare hands" he said as he raised and shook his hands at us, "a *German*, but still a man."

His eyes burned red and then became calm, apologetic, "I could do no more," he said.

As I looked around the classroom, I saw the stunned look of my classmates. Even our professor, Dr. Nuwer, looked stirred and uncomfortable. "Let's give *Monsieur Legier* a nice round of applause," she said, trying to put everyone back at ease.

\* \* \*

A month has gone by and I have gotten used to living in a box with another person. We have bunk beds and share a single wardrobe cabinet. When we get ready for class or go out together to *Le Commerce*, getting ready always seems like an intricate game of Twister; maneuvering around each other in our tiny space. I have learned to live without a hairdryer, as mine does not work here. (Note to self: buy adaptors next time.) I have learned to take the train, the *TGV*, and to use my *Eurail* pass. And I have learned to pack light for weekend trips to French cities like *Tours*, the mini-Paris, and *Orleans*, the city of Joan of Arc. *Tours* was a haven of shopping and late-night drinks. In *Orleans*, Audrey and I visited *Sainte Croix* church and saw a wedding party which had released hundreds of tiny pink paper hearts in the air like confetti to commemorate their day. I was so glad I had taken this leap and come to France as the paper hearts rained lightly over me. Next stop: Paris.

## CHAPTER 2

### Cafés, Dogshit & Lung Cancer du Jour Paris

Since arriving in France I had been introduced to many French writers: Carnus, Zola, Victor Hugo. But it was Emma Bovary who had my heart. She was the character I was most fond of, so much so that I chose Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for my Senior Thesis. While she is a much reviled character, I have found her sweet spot, her soft side. She is not evil; she is sad, a motherless daughter who needed attention and love. In the same way that our pop star Madonna does . . . or at least that's the gist of my paper, the relationship I will try to exploit. I am a sucker for flawed characters, especially needy ones, characters who try to fill their internal void with consumption, whether it be the consumption of men, money, booze, pills: I am riveted and engaged just the same.

*She longed to travel—or go back to the convent. She wanted to die, and she wanted to live in Paris.* Emma's desperation always startles me, but amuses me as well. She was tired of being a country wife. She wanted something more substantial, something more exotic, more decadent. To Emma, Paris was where she was meant to be, not holed up in *Rouen* being a bored housewife. Paris, for Emma, was where she belonged. And I was about to find out if I, too, belonged in Paris.

For me, Paris was a dream . . . a place I had imagined many times. I had vivid pictures in my mind of what I knew of Paris: the black and white photograph of the



famed kiss at the *Hotel de Ville*, Hemingway and Gertrude Stein having oysters and aperitifs at *Le Rotonde*, impeccably dressed French women in scarves smoking *Gaulouises* and looking chic, the Eiffel Tower looming large over the lighted city, and the romance and magic of the famed *Rive Gauche* (Left Bank).

I still remember the Hemingway quote from *A Moveable Feast* in high school: “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a movable feast.”

I like Hemingway’s writing, of course, but it’s really his life, his thirst for adventure that draws me to his work and his biography. Seeing Shakespeare & Co., the bookshop run by Sylvia Beech, where Hemingway borrowed books and had his first publishing experience, is high on my list of “things to do while in Paris.”

“We are living Hemingway’s life.” Audrey loves to say this whenever we are back at the hostel. It resembles an old-fashioned rooming house; and it is located in *Montparnasse*, where Hemingway once lived at *74 rue du Cardinal-Lemoine*, a fourth-floor walk-up. The bedding and towels at the hostel are threadbare, smelling seventy-five years old. The coils in the mattresses poke through, and the shower lacks a curtain. We take all of this in stride and remind ourselves that we are living just like Hemingway.

We had arrived in Paris a few days ago to begin our week’s worth of instruction in the City of Eternal Love; and I have to say, it’s not what I expected. I didn’t expect it to smell of garbage or for the sidewalks to be splattered with piles of dog shit. I didn’t expect it to be so gray and opaque. The energy is different than I

had anticipated—I was expecting a thumping, thriving, energetic city like New York; but Paris has a very different feel, a slowness that I was not anticipating. Yes, it's antiquated and pretty, but I cannot feel the magic yet, the magic that I thought Paris possessed. I hate to have the attitude that perhaps things look better on TV.

We went to the Louvre today, and I saw the *Mona Lisa*. I had heard that it was a disappointment in real life. It's true. The painting is roped off like a nightclub in L.A., behind bulletproof glass that looks like scratched plastic. And it is *so tiny*—practically the size of a family photo, an 8x10. There were hordes of people just staring at her, as if they thought she would indeed blink if they waited long enough. It was not the experience I thought it would be. But I did fall in love with a painting, *Napoleon's Coronation* by Jaques-Louis David. It is massive and rich with color and majesty. The painting commemorates the day that Napoleon was crowned Emperor of France in 1804. The setting is the coronation at *Notre-Dame Cathedral*, when he took the crown *away* from the Pope and *crowned himself*. The painting is brilliant, beautifully executed but my love for it also ties into my newfound fascination with Napoleon; his audacity. Napoleon who famously said, "I found the crown of France in the gutter, and I picked it up." Picked it up, he certainly did, but like all rulers, from Caesar before him to et al . . . megalomania, not to mention overextension of empire, were his downfall; as well, as Waterloo.

I have come to really appreciate and love Napoleon since I have been in France. He is generally considered a hero by most of the French, although sometimes

his legacy is of concern. He grew up poor and his native language was Italian. He came from nothing, wasn't a good student yet he was on his way to taking over the world.

\* \* \*

The social groups of the Abbey have been firmly established by now, just like in high school. Audrey and I have chosen to be “the outsiders.” Our age was the real separator, but so was our attitude. We didn't want to join the others at Planet Hollywood or go dancing until dawn at Buddha Bar (Not to mention the nightly games of “drink-til-you-fuck-or-throw-up” back at the Abbey). We were in Europe and France to *experience* it, *live* it, *feel* it—not to get drunk and hook-up. This wasn't summer camp for us.

Mornings in Paris were reserved for “class time.” Trips to museums or touristy locales would be explored with our classmates and our professors. On-site lectures were provided in both French and English. We visited the *Conciergerie* where Marie Antoinette (prisoner # 280) was imprisoned before her beheading for treason; we walked along the *Champs-Elysees* to the *Arc de Triomphe*, where Hitler ordered his soldiers to march every day at noon during the Occupation; we toured the *Pere Lachaise* cemetery where Edith Piaf, Gertrude Stein, and Jim Morrison are buried; we lit candles at *Notre-Dame* and visited the Catacombs where the skeletons of more than six million people are artfully arranged in tunnels just below the busy streets of Paris; we took the “*Amelie*” tour, visiting the neighborhood haunts of

*Montmartre*, where the movie's heroine frequented: the grocery store, the café, and the *Basilique du Sacre-Coeur*. I bought a small oil painting near the church where many artists line the narrow streets: a painting of a red café on a black and white *Parisian Rue*.

We spent afternoons sitting in cafes, and walking the cobbled streets of Paris. Audrey and I spent many long hours sipping bitter *Parisian* coffee, eating crepes of *beurre & sucre* (butter & sugar) and banana & Nutella. We talked endlessly, catching up on every detail of each others' lives; and watched Paris, mesmerized by the "real Parisians" walking by, admiring the unique flip of a *Parisian* scarf in fuscia or pomegranate red, and sharing a laugh when we actually saw someone in a *beret* (we did) or riding a bicycle while also smoking a cigarette (ditto.) I think it was Ozzy Osborne who said, "the dogs smoke in France," and after being here for a few days, I tend to agree with him. Cough. Cough.

Audrey and I loved the idea of being lost in Paris. We purposefully left our *Lonely Planet* guide back at the hostel and just went . . . every corner presenting a new adventure. We picked a direction randomly and started walking. It was because of this that we were able to find some real treasures in Paris—a small store selling hand-knitted scarves, a tiny chocolatier reminiscent of the one in the movie *Chocolat*, and a *papeterie* with gorgeous scented writing papers.

We had visited the lauded tourist stops, Audrey took a picture of me at the door of Shakespeare & Co., but we also wanted to see "normal life" in Paris, the

streets not on the bus tour. We had gotten into the habit of visiting *epicerie* (grocery stores) when we went to new cities. You can tell the most about a culture by what they eat: fresh rabbit, furry foot attached, green-green beans, red-red tomatoes, and every fruit imaginable in every shade of roses. *Parisians* were serious about their cuisine. Food is culture.

\* \* \*

I have watery, quarter-sized blisters on my feet from walking Paris literally from one end to the other. The cobbled streets and my stylish Ralph Lauren sneakers don't work well together. I keep applying and re-applying Neosporin and band-aids, and I'm walking as if barefoot on broken glass.

Paris has been growing on me; I'm enjoying lots of things here—the café's, walking the streets, having a great time hanging and exploring the city with Audrey. Last night Audrey and I stumbled onto an adorable fondue restaurant in the heart of the Latin Quarter. It is a windy set of cobbled lanes inundated with Greek restaurants and gyro stands next to souvenir shops that sell replicas of Napoleon and the guillotine. Interspersed among all of this commerce are some extraordinary bistros, mostly hidden from the touristy tourists. (read: the loud Iowans wearing American flag sweatshirts and *Jesus Saves* baseball caps.) The Latin Quarter gets its name because of its proximity to the *Sorbonne* and the use of Latin spoken there during the Middle Ages. We called our new friend Olivier to join us for dinner. Olivier was a

Ph.D. candidate at the *Sorbonne* who was fluent in English. We met when he was a guest speaker at the Abbey sharing his experiences as an exchange student at the University of Southern Mississippi. He discussed his dissertation on the role of the American President's Press Secretary. I went up to him after his talk and introduced myself.

"Hi, you're never going to believe this," I said, "But my step-brother is the President's current Press Secretary."

His eyes widened but he said nothing. I gave him my email address and told him we would be in Paris soon.

The restaurant had thirty types of fondue to pick from: earthy smoked cheeses, combinations with applewood and bacon, a tart and tangy *bleu* cheese, and my favorite—the mellow yet plucky Swiss combo; heavy with wine. The bread was rough and crusty, slices of ham and baby gerkins were available for dipping. The weather was cool, but comfortable, and off in the distance accordions could be heard playing. It was a perfect Parisian night.

The next night Audrey and I found ourselves in a Moroccan restaurant that had all the trimmings of colonized French Morocco: vivid maroon and cobalt drapes swaying in the gentle night air. The smell of incense and candlewax scented the dining hall. Our table was full of brilliantly-colored glasses and silver, Arab-style salt and pepper pots. We ate couscous with lamb accented with apricots, plums and raisins, flavored heavily with cumin, cinnamon, and saffron. After dinner we went to the Barrio Latino club for salsa dancing. The night ended with us underneath the

Eiffel Tower, which is humungous, much bigger than I ever imagined, lit up with what looked like thousands of blinking butterfly lights.

Our time in Paris was coming to an end. In a few days we would all be heading in different directions for our two-week Spring Break. Audrey was off to Ireland and Amsterdam; other students have trips planned to Greece, Spain, Morocco, and Turkey. I was traveling to Italy, on my own, and I was ready.

\* \* \*

“What are we all running from?” It’s a question that had been weighing heavily on my mind. And it’s a question that I had asked one of our professors, the Director of The Abbey program. It was rumored that he was married with children before he started spending nine months of the year in France. He was now divorced and engaged to a former Abbey participant. Another professor was also escaping a bad marriage, or so the gossip grapevine went. So the assumption behind the question didn’t seem to be purely speculation on my part. And I wasn’t just asking it of my professors; I was asking myself as well, *all* of us, really why were we here? What were we running from?

According to Frommer’s travel services, only 20% of Americans even have passports. Why us, how did we become the minority in this equation? It is simply not the norm to leave behind all that you know—your friends, your family, your familiarity—to live out of a suitcase or backpack, visiting places where they do not

speaking your language and you will always be a foreigner. What possesses someone to do this?

I had asked some of the other Abbey participants what made them come to France, the answers varied from “easy credit” to “so I could get drunk” to “because my parents made me.” I wanted to know my professor’s answer because he was an adult, like me, yet here we both were, in an obscure valley in the French countryside.

“Why did you say running *from*?” he countered, “maybe we are running *to*?”

I was not really satisfied with his answer, even though I did agree that there was also something we were all searching for. But we were also turning our backs on something.

I thought I knew my reasons: escape, adventure, certainly a little “real life” escape. As for me, I’ve always been a runner—thinking that by going somewhere new, somewhere different, I could change my life. *Under the Tuscan Sun* author Frances Mayes put it best: “I recognize the impulse. I recognize the desire to surprise your own life.” And I guess that’s why I wanted to travel, why I had moved to California ten years before, because I wanted a different life, an extraordinary life. I didn’t want to simply be a wife or a mother. Of course, those are things I desire, but I have a need to be selfish first, to go on adventures, to live and try and fail before I could entertain the idea of marriage or motherhood. To quote Helen Keller, “life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.” I was looking for the adventure.

With this in mind, I said goodbye to Audrey and my fellow Abbey-ites and boarded a plane for Rome. *Ciao Bella!*



## CHAPTER 3

### Chocolate & Spaghetti

#### Italy

After living in a postage stamp-sized dorm with Audrey, and in the spartan hostel in Paris, I wanted to treat myself and have a real hotel experience complete with en-suite bathroom. Traveling in the backpacker-style that we had done on our weekend trips, I had gotten used to being uncomfortable: sleepless all-night train rides, a shared single bed, sleeping on cheap motel carpeting that should have been pulled up and thrown out decades before, bath towels the size and feel of a rough paper towel. It's funny how your concept of things changes when you travel this way—a comfortable bed is a gift, not an expectation. A bathroom *in* the hotel room as opposed to down the hall is an unexpected delight! A *bathtub* in a hotel room elicits cartwheels of pure joy; amenities such as “hot” hot water, big fluffy towels, and water pressure also brings a smile to the lips.

My coming to Italy was a bit of a lark. I could have gone anywhere, but I finally settled on Italy for two reasons: 1) the movie *La Dolce Vita* which is romantic and bizarre and in my mind *molto italiano*, and 2) Audrey. She said she would never talk to me again if I didn't go to Italy, *immediately!* She had spent a summer there and it had gotten under her skin. She had an Italian boyfriend, *Constantin* (which translated literally means *firm*), she had spent a lot of time in Rome and Milan, and long weekends at *Constantin's* family's house on Lake Como.

My flight arrived at *Ciampano* Airport outside of Rome around eleven at night. It had been a quick, easy flight but I was still exhausted from the packing and planning before leaving Paris. I took a taxi into the city. When the taxi neared the city of Rome and I first saw the *Piazza Venezia*, a towering monument high above the city, often referred to as “the wedding cake” because of its white-tiered and elaborate design, my heart fluttered and screamed for the first time in Rome. I was looking forward to my days exploring Rome.

I had found the *Hotel Traiano* online. It had a gorgeous (and soft!) bed, frescoed breakfast room, and marble and gold inlaid lobby. The concierge was named *Giacomo*! It was exactly what I was looking for. That night, exhausted and happy, I slept for fourteen hours.

My trip included four days in *Roma* (Rome), three days in *Firenze* (Florence) and four days in *Venezia* (Venice). I would have two days on my own in Rome before Shannon, my old college roommate from my first go-round at college, arrived. But I couldn’t wait until she arrived to check out the sights. I was anxious and greedy; I wanted to soak up Rome, alone, *now*. So I did.

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Pistachio gelato, espresso doppio, ham & cheese pizza, ricotta & spinach ravioli with tomato-basil sauce—I think of Italy in terms of food and beauty. It is a

gourmand's delight. The display cases rival those of France for their intricate and artisanal presentations of multi-colored sandwiches, square-cut pizzas, and doughy-bready delicacies filled with chocolate and almond paste. I ate well in Italy.

Having missed breakfast at the hotel, I made my way to a nearby *panetteria*. My first breakfast in Rome consisted of a *doppio espresso* and a *cioccolato cornetto*. The pastry was light and heavenly and filled plump like a pastry bag with chocolate the consistency of cake frosting. The coffee made French coffee seem inadequate both in aroma and taste. When I finished my first pastry, I ordered another; I had a busy day ahead and needed the added energy, plus I am a sucker for decadent chocolate.

While languishing over my delicious *italiano* breakfast, I realized that this was the first time that I'd been alone in over six weeks. Between sharing a room with Audrey, attending classes and social events at the Abbey, and never traveling by myself until now, it was a strange but welcome feeling. I sat for a bit longer just to savor the feeling and the realization that I was truly on my own, I could do whatever I wanted to do, no one else's schedule or demands to accommodate. I couldn't wait to begin the next few days of wandering around as aimlessly as I wanted . . .

It was in Rome that I felt the most linguistically inept. I have (what I think) is an enormous grasp of the English language. Being in France for the last several weeks, I had a nominal grasp of the French language. I arrived in Italy and could not say as much as "hello." It was a huge lesson while being very quiet. Not knowing a language makes you humble and makes you choose your words and phrases (and

hand signals) carefully. I felt on my face the fear and embarrassment I had seen on numerous foreigners in America: the feeling of stupidity and helplessness. (Note to self: Be extra helpful to lost-looking foreigners and those struggling with English back in the States.) I made it through with the help of strangers and some quickly learned Italian phrases, but it was beyond wonderful in a way. When in your adult life do you get the chance to learn something entirely new, such as saying “hello” and “good-bye?” It’s the experiences that most puncture the very core of your existence, like the crutch of your native tongue failing you that makes you grow the most.

I didn’t look at my travel guide or consult a map; instead I did as Audrey and I had done throughout our days in Paris; I chose a direction and started walking. The streets were cobbled and the shops near the hotel small and scattered along the busy sidewalks. I noticed a certain light to Rome, a yellowed hew that was noticeably different from the palette of grays of Paris. I walked a few blocks through windy side streets and wound up in front of the *Fontana di Trevi*. Tourist shops, clothiers, and *gelaterias* surrounded the fountain. Scores of tourists posed for photos and tossed coins while making a wish. I stood and stared, in awe.

Every so often I would come across a man roasting chestnuts fanned like a flower in shades of brown, yellow, and burnt umber in a wheel-shaped tin, the woody-sweet smell teased my nose. I walked past the designer shops, Gucci, Ferragamo, Valentino, and came to another stop in front of the Spanish Steps, with people lounging and (again) snapping pictures. Teenagers drank wine on the steps in small clusters, and lovers embraced as they headed up to the 138<sup>th</sup> and final step.

Apparently these steps hadn't become such a popular tourist destination until the movie *Roman Holiday* starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn.

I was falling in love with Rome, street by street, so many sites of beauty and history. Being in Rome was like walking inside an art history book. Every corner I turned, every site I encountered was weighed down with centuries of historical significance. I felt small in Rome, like life would go on without me, as it had gone on before, for thousands of years.

What struck me most about Rome was the unexpectedness of the famous sites. I would be walking down a seemingly normal street, one lined with shops and restaurants, turn a corner and *just there* would be the Trevi Fountain, with all its water fountains and Roman statues and huddled tourists or the Spanish Steps; the Colosseum also snuck up on me. Caesar said, "I found Rome brick and left it marble." His presence was everywhere: *Piazza del Popolo*, *Tiber River Castle*, *Piazza Venezia*, Palantine Hill, the ancient city of Rome, Circus Maximus, the Pantheon; there are even traces of stacked bricks that date back to when Rome was a walled city. I was getting a crash course in Roman history, and it was better than any book I had ever read. Looking, touching, walking the sites ignited in me a love of history that I retain to this day. When I left Rome, left Europe, I stocked up on books to add depth and texture to the history I had already seen first hand: *The Rise of the Roman Empire* by Polybius, *The Renaissance in Rome*, *The Smiles of Rome: A*

*Literary Companion for Readers and Travelers, The Roman Family in the Empire: Rome, Italy, and Beyond, Road to Rome: An Artist's Year in Italy,* and devoured them.

It was on Rome's streets that I thought about what a turn my life had taken from just a year ago. I kept asking myself: who would have thought I'd be in Italy at all, or Europe for that matter? It was all a serendipitous happening of events, and I recognized how my life had grown. I felt proud and humble at the same time.

I also called my mom for the first time since leaving Paris. She had gone on a budget package deal to Rome before she got married, her one and only time out of the country. She never told me about the details of Rome—only that she liked it.

“Why didn't you tell me about Rome?” I asked, “the buildings, the monuments, the beauty, why, Mom?”

“Because, Tracey, Rome is a place you have to see to understand,” she said, “no one can explain it to you.”

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The next day I had pizza for breakfast. I found a tiny café on a side street near the *Galleria*. I ordered *doppio espresso* and a slice of square-cut pizza topped with cheese and *prosciutto*. I sat outside, wrote in my journal, and marveled at the people walking by, striking eyes, Roman noses, and superb fashion on both men and women. Everyone seemed so elegant, so regal, I looked down at my jeans and traveling shoes and felt instantly like a sloppy American. The backpack and makeup-less face

certainly didn't add to my look. Oh well, I wasn't Italian, I *was* American, of European descent but *so long ago*, and whatever European style may have existed in my ancestors has been watered down into the American obsession, particularly when traveling in foreign countries, of comfort over style.

After breakfast I found myself near a McDonald's, so I went in to have a look around at the décor and their menu. I had done this a few times during my travels in France. I always find this tells me a lot about the culture, the people, what they *really* eat, not what the guidebooks *say* they eat. I was overly impressed to learn that the McDonald's in Rome comes with its own elaborate and shiny espresso bar—how *very italiano!*

Where are all the beautiful Italian men? That's what I kept wondering on my second day as I combed the streets of Rome looking for “the most beautiful men you will ever see.” That's the way Audrey had described the men of Rome, well really in *all* of Italy. I think she actually used the term “carved out of milk chocolate.”

As in Paris, I spent many hours at outdoor cafes in Rome. One in particular, which afforded me a grand view of the *Piazza Venetezia*, became a favorite. I would come here for my mid-afternoon coffee and snack, usually some sort of *panini* stacked with rainbow colors of ingredients and tasting as luscious as it looked. I would eat slowly, savoring every olive, every slice of tomato, every milky slab of buffalo mozzarella, and stare out at the busy Roman roundabout between me and the *Piazza Venetezia*, and listen to the buzzing of scooters and an opera of honking horns could be heard.

I ended my last day of solo exploring with a shopping trip. I'm not much of a shopper, but I have become accustomed to picking up treats. At the famed *Galleria*, I bought stitched and beaded emerald green and tangerine orange picture frames, a cross necklace that looked as though it were made during the Middle Ages; soaps and lotions from Lush: Banana Moon soap, Sympathy for the Skin lotion (a heady mixture of banana, vanilla, and caramel), and fizzy Bath Bombs of bright cotton candy pink and bubble gum blue to use in the hotel's bathtub! Back at my room, I put on the Carla Bruni CD that I'd bought in Paris, slunk into the tub, and lay my head back as she sang to me . . . *le ciel dans une chambre* . . .

After my bath, I dressed up for the first time since Audrey and I went salsa dancing in Paris. And by "dressed up" I mean that I wore an ironed shirt, took special interest in my make up, and chose not to wear my hair in the usual, rubber-banded bundle at the nape of my neck. I was curious about a Scottish bar I had seen near the hotel. Tonight I would go there and have a drink, but first I was booked on a "Rome by Night" tour of the city.

The lights were magnificent: all of the famous ruins and monuments lit up. At the Vatican I felt a sense of respect for the Catholic religion in a way that has been lacking in most of my adult life. The tour gave me a new appreciation for what I had seen the last few days.

I felt sorry for the American parents sitting across from me chastising their teenage son for being in Rome and *being asleep on the tour!* But I also sympathized



with their son. He was a teenager and he was with his parents—how could this really be fun for him? Or seriously enlightening? I knew that if that had been me, if I had come here at that age, I would have disrespect also. Because I knew this about myself and can recognize the frivolity of my own youth, I drank everything in, I savored and swooned, I paid my respects. But I am well aware that I am only able do this because I was thirty-three. It took me this long to get to this place. I was like wine; I needed to age, to grow, to bloom. And it was with this “I have lived life and now I *get it* perspective” that I could appreciate Rome, in a way that I never could have as a younger person. I was always curious if the students at the Abbey really understood what they were seeing and experiencing, or if it was all just a big field trip for them?

These last few days in Rome I finally understand why Italians are so proud of being Italian. I have had several friends over the years, usually second-generation Italian-Americans from New York or Rhode Island, and they wore their heritage like a battle scar. But being here, I get it, it makes total sense to me now. So far, Italy is amazing.

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Shannon would be arriving in the morning and we had a full itinerary planned before we headed up to Florence. We had a lot to see: Vatican City, the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican Museum. We were even set to go to a mass officiated by Pope

John Paul II. And of course I would be backtracking over all of the sites I had already seen the last few days. I hated to admit it but I was ready for some company.

As soon as she stepped off the train platform, I knew we were going to have problems. She looked fresh as a daisy, everything matched: pink gloves, pink hat, pink scarf—nothing looked warm, just pink. She was pulling a heavy suitcase and I knew right away that she had no idea what she was in for, how challenging and non-glamorous touring around actually is. It is a lesson in survival, minimalism, and comfort. Her pointed boots worried me the most.

By the time we boarded the train to Florence, I hated Shannon.

### Florence: *Hotel Casci*

Have you ever had to pretend to like someone because you were stuck with them? This was my new reality traveling with Shannon. We would be together in Florence and for a few days in Venice. I was officially counting down until her departure. How could things have gone so terribly wrong seemingly so quickly?

To be fair, Shannon was ill-prepared for this trip. She thought she was going on vacation. She didn't realize that touring is anything but a vacation. She was ill-prepared for the inconveniences ahead. She got annoyed when the shopkeepers or waiters didn't speak English, she hated that the food wasn't like *back home* at The

Olive Garden; and she hated that there were no elevators to access the Sistine Chapel or the *Duomo*; her feet had blisters and she was often freezing.

I came across this page from my journal that was written as I rode the train from Rome to Florence:

*I miss my life in France—I miss Audrey, and my books, and classes, and solitude and my dorm room, and Le Commerce. I miss my bed. I am so glad I am in Second Class (due to my Eurail pass) and Shannon is in First. I am alone—FINALLY. I am happy to be alone and writing in my journal and on a train, and able to read. It's not her, she is very nice, but she drives me nuts/crazy. Everything she does bugs the living shit out of me—her loud voice, her obsession with her hair and applying and re-applying lip gloss. UGH! Never again. I am having to fake concern and excitement and am making up stupid conversations—she doesn't read or watch the news or know anything about pop culture . . . I keep wondering what we talked about back in college?*

I was determined to make the best of it, as I'm sure she wasn't loving me either. We stayed at the *Hotel Casci*, a boutique hotel on a side street near *San Lorenzo* where the outdoor markets are held. The hotel was cozy and the rooms

weren't as fancy as the hotel in Rome, but the bed was comfortable and we had an ensuite bathroom. We went to sleep early and had a big day of touring planned for the next day.

It was Frances Mayes' words that I heard in my head as I walked around Florence. I had read *Under the Tuscan Sun* in preparation for my journey, wanting to get a taste, some insight of what I was in for. It was a wonderful companion to my travels; it was like having a girlfriend slip secrets into my ear as I went from place to place. It made the settings seem eerily familiar: the outdoor leather markets, the fresh fruit stands where they had strawberries the size of small apples, the ceramic vendors, and the pristine Florentine writing paper sold by the sheet.

I bought ceramic salad tongs of yellow and green and pastel purple, a leather-bound writing diary, and an ivory and gold embroidered table runner for my mother's formal dining table. Shannon and I both bought scarves embroidered with tiny red roses; Shannon also bought postcards that read *Ciao Italia* written in the style of the Coca-Cola logo, as well as shot glasses painted with the word *Firenze* in green, red, and white letters.

After shopping, we went to the *Duomo*. This cathedral is the most dominant structure in all of Florence. Whereas Rome is full of these spectacular sites every few blocks, the *Duomo* stands alone. The color and design: green, white, and pink marble, struck me as odd and almost gaudy, especially set against the backdrop of pale browns, yellows, and maroons of the rest of Florence.

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It was at a café that I first noticed them. Henry James refers to them as “one’s detested fellow pilgrim.” I call them the Annoying Americans. That was when I noticed how seemingly different I had become; how different I felt from *them*. How I wanted to blend and not wear my American-ness like a flag wrapped around my shoulders. I didn’t want to be handed the tourist menu written in English. I wanted to stumble my way through my food orders in a low voice, not like my seemingly boisterous Anglo counterparts. I wanted to stumble and fail, but be respected for it. I wanted to earn my traveling credentials.

After lunch we headed to *Il Gelato Vivoli*, rumored to be the best *gelateria* in all of Florence. I got two gooey scoops, one of pistachio, which has become my new obsession, and one of honeycomb. Shannon had strawberry and tiramisu. We spent the rest of the day peeking into any church we came upon, walking along the Arno River and trying to be civil to one another. By the time we got back to our hotel, we were famished.

For our first dinner in Florence, the young Lombardi son recommended a restaurant just around the corner. Clusters of people waited outside the door for a table. *Trattoria Za Za* was small and intimate inside, the walls made of brick. The conversation, laughter, and glasses clinking rose and fell like a grand symphony. I

had the best Italian meal of my life: spinach and ricotta ravioli with a tomato-meat sauce, plump wild strawberries and creamy vanilla custard, *espresso doppio*. Pure perfection.

As soon as we got back to the hotel I threw up my entire meal. What a waste. Sometimes I have a sensitive stomach. While I grew up on rich fried and creamed Southern foods, the ten years I spent in California gave me an entirely new digestive system. Rich foods, fried foods, or too much food will often do me in. But tonight's dinner was worth it, I had simply stuffed myself too full.

For tomorrow we had plans to see the statue of *Michelangelo's David* at the *Galleria dell'Accademia*. I read in my *Europe for Dummies* book that Michelangelo carved *David* out of what was deemed an unusable piece of marble. It is my favorite sculpture. To see the original, in person, was a dream. I love how casually he holds a rock in his right hand and how his slingshot is resting gently on his left shoulder. The fluidity of his body, the exactness of his muscles, and the innocence that his face portrays make this such a compelling piece.

When we arrived at the *Accademia*, it was closed. We were told there was a museum strike. That's one of the things I forgot to mention in my travels through both France and Italy: the ubiquity of strikes and protests. Strikes are quite common in Europe it seems: train strikes, worker strikes, student strikes. If any politician in France even mentions an end to the much-beloved four-week vacation or a plan to reform France's "employment for life" policy, the streets fill and bureaucracy comes to a standstill. Although I had become aware of the Italians' passion for striking, the

museum strike in Florence was my first experience with it in Italy. I had even heard whispers of a pasta strike. What could we do? Shannon and I had to make alternate plans.

Fortunately, we were able to see a replica of *David* at the *Palazza Vecchio*, which is where the original *David* had stood until 1873. While *David* was as beautiful and perfect as I had seen in art books, it was slightly upstaged by the nearby Fountain of Neptune. Built in the 1500's, the fountain sits in front of the *Palazzo Vecchio* on the *Plaza della Signoria*, one of the many public squares in the vicinity. Neptune stands towering over the fountain, which is decorated with satyrs, sea horses, and bronze river gods. Unfortunately, as in all old bronze statues, the one-time gleaming bronze has faded and morphed into an unsightly malachite green.

These last few days I have gotten a quick education on Florence and its famous inhabitants. Florence Nightingale (hence the name!) was born here in 1820; Leonardo da Vinci was born just outside of the city; writer Niccolo Machiavelli, (whose classic *The Prince* literally helped to coin a phrase that we still use today: "Machiavellian") was born and raised in Florence; and also Dante, who wrote *Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy.) It was in the opening of *The Divine Comedy* that I found a relevant line for me and my new life: *What must one do in order to grow?*  
*Answer: Packing and unpacking.*

Venice: Hotel Pensione alla Salute

Henry James said, “Venice is a refuge of endless strange secrets, broken fortunes, and wounded hearts.” For me, Venice was a dream. I saw sunsets and Picassos. I ate well, slept well, and sent pretty postcards with a Robert Benchley quote written on them: *Streets are flooded. Please advise.*

We arrived by train at the *Stazione Santa Lucia*. We had left Florence a day early, we had seen what we wanted to see, and with the museum strike lingering, we had decided to just move on. As soon as we entered the *vaporetto* (water bus), which was full to capacity with sleepy travelers, Shannon pulled out her map, proceeded to unfold it to its full width, then reached into her purse and pulled out a small flashlight, blinding people as she searched the map with the light and asked loudly, “Where is the hotel at, ya’ll?”

The *Hotel Pensione alla Salute* was located in the Guggenheim district of Venice. A converted seventeenth-century palazzo, it has high ceilings, an open lobby, and a very comfortable feel. Our room was enormous. The hotel sat a short walk from the *Santa Maria della Salute* church. I don’t think I’ve mentioned how many churches I set foot in since coming to Italy, all over France, too, for that matter. They are so old, often beautiful, and usually famous. After a while, they begin to blur into one.

Peggy Guggenheim was the most intriguing thing about Venice. Her father sank with the Titanic, and she lived the life of a “poor little rich girl.” She settled in



the city in 1949 and bought a “painting a day,” establishing what is now the third most visited museum in all of Venice. She is as famous for her love of art—she’s credited with discovering Jackson Pollack—as she is for her colorful personality. One of her most famous quotes was the answer to the following question: How many husbands have you had? Her reply: “Mine, or other peoples’?”

The hotel did not have an elevator or an en-suite bathroom. These are two things that Shannon could not handle. She grumped as she lugged her enormous suitcase up the stairwells, and refused to get into the bathtub until she was able to buy a bleach-based cleaning product and scrub it down.

“Shannon, they clean the bathrooms daily,” I said.

“I am not getting in there until I clean it myself,” she said, “I can’t believe it doesn’t bother you. It’s disgusting.”

But it didn’t bother me. I was used to the sometimes less than ideal situations that come with being in a foreign country. I had learned to “bend like the willow” as the *Dao de Ching* suggests. *Two more days*, that’s all I kept telling myself, *just two more days*.

We spent the morning together. We went to the *Basilica di San Marco a Venezia*, the most famous church there. The building is said to be a superb example of Byzantine architecture, but to my untrained eye it resembled photos I’d seen of the spires of Red Square in Moscow. It was beautiful nonetheless, except for the birds. There are more pigeons in the *Piazza San Marco* than in the Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. I

felt like Tippi Hedren as I negotiated my way through the square trying not to run into any exuberant birds.

We sat at an outdoor café in Saint Mark's square and listened to a string quartet. They played gorgeous classical music. We ordered seven-euro bottles of Evian. We took our one and only gondola ride up the Grand Canal. Up to this point we had relied on the *vaporetto* and water taxis, but we decided to splurge on the 55 euro trip.

The gondola let us off at the famous Rialto Bridge. We went in and out of shops that sold masks for the traditional Carnival in Venice. Opera music floated through the tiny alleyways outside of the shops. I thought how very *italiano!* The music so moved me that I went into a small music shop and bought CD's of *Puccini* and *Verdi*.

I like to get lost in a new city; Audrey and I call it "exploring." I don't like to rely on a map—instead, I prefer to walk the streets, hoping to find a surprise: a unique neighborhood, a tucked-away restaurant or a small farmer's market with plump produce and salted nuts. But Shannon hates it; she has the map out every five minutes, annoyed when she doesn't know *exactly* where we are at all times.

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It was when we reached Venice that we first started doing things on our own. At that point we were annoyed with each other. I welcomed the alone time. On one

of our first “time-outs,” I found (by accident) a small *trattoria* along a side canal near our hotel. *La Piscina Café* had outdoor tables, a slight breeze blew, and honeymoon couples were holding hands and kissing as they walked along the canal. I had always heard that Paris was the city of romance, but being in Venice I beg to differ. I had tortellini (hand-wrapped!) stuffed with spinach mousse and topped with a thick and creamy ricotta cheese sauce. Very succulent, very light, just perfect. I felt refreshed.

We spent most of the afternoon on our own; we chose to meet up for dinner near the Rialto Bridge on the Grand Canal. The only place that had available tables was Café Orientale. It was there that we met the waiter Nicola. He took an instant liking to Shannon, complimenting her over and over again on her powdery blue eyes. He was young, about twenty, blonde, built, and cocky in the way only an Italian can get away with. Somehow it came off as charming. Since our dinner started late, and the restaurant was closing by the time we ordered our coffee and desserts, Nicola offered to show us around the Venice nightlife. It was a welcome distraction, so we said yes.

We landed at *Dove* piano bar which was “five minutes by foot” from Café Orientale. I love that in Venice when giving directions people will ask you, “by water or by foot?” And then they go on to speak in wonderful phrases like “go left here and then over three bridges.” Yes, we are in a city literally built on water; it’s almost incomprehensible.

As soon as we arrived, Nicola slipped into the bathroom and changed clothes. He was no longer wearing his waitering outfit, but instead had changed into low-slung

jeans, his black and gold Dolce & Gabbana briefs visible, and the tightest, clingiest black knit shirts. It would look obscene at the San Francisco Gay Pride parade. But it worked.

After we ordered our drinks Nicola began to entertain us. First by clanging his drink glass loudly with a knife and singing in a language I didn't understand, then by standing on the table and flamenco dancing, clicking his heels, and yelling, at Shannon.

"*Bella*, I am Tarzan, and you are Jane." His smile was piercing and disarming. And his cockiness made all of this seem quite charming. He pulled Shannon up onto the table with him. Shannon was in shock; I couldn't stop laughing. Mossimo, who seemed to be used to the boldness that was *Nicola*, just sat back enjoying his glass of wine. As I glanced around the otherwise quiet piano bar, I realized that no one seemed annoyed with Nicola's antics; apparently this is acceptable behavior in a bar in Venice.

"*Bella*, I want to prepare a baby with you!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, as if declaring it to the world.

He got down on both knees and said "*Bella*, take me to America with you—*please*—I love you!" It was a desperate plea by a charming boy. Shannon wasn't sure how to react; uncomfortable isn't *quite* the word I would use.

"You are so crazy, you *I-tal-i-ans*, I swear!" she said, trying to politely step down off the table.

When Mossimo made a lunge for me, it was time to go. It's one thing if this young, funny, cocky Italian kid wanted to make Shannon cringe—to my utter enjoyment, I must admit—it's another when his creepy older friend tries to go in for the kill with me. I fake a yawn and tell Shannon it's time to go.

“Sorry, it's getting late,” I said.

After arguing for a few minutes, we were able to leave on friendly terms. After we said our goodbyes, and “nice to meet you's,” I said to Nicola, “You are so lucky that you live here, surrounded by water.”

“Yes. I live in the shit,” he said with a wide grin in his face.

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“I hate art!” Shannon said this right before she pushed her way out of the *Gallerie dell'Accademie*. (She had simply walked around bored and heavy-footed like a rhinoceros earlier at the *Ce'Pesare* Modern Museum of Art.) It was as if she had punched me. How could anybody say that, especially in the city where oil painting was invented?

We had started the morning in good spirits, laughing about the night before with Nicola and Mossimo. We had agreed on an itinerary of a few museums, lunch, and then she would do some shopping while I did my laundry. She'd had her fill of art and culture. That afternoon our “time-out” began earlier than expected.

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I met them at the laundromat. They saw me struggling with the Italian washing machine and asked if I needed help. Once my machine was working properly, we started talking. We clicked pretty easily—all traveling, all in school, same pop culture references. Ilya was from Alabama, originally from Russia—the Ukraine; he went to school at Northwestern. Jamie was from Bainbridge Island, near Seattle, and went to Evergreen State College in Washington State. He was beyond cute, and he still had baby fat; but is going to be *Gorgeous!* Both were twenty-one and doing an exchange year at St. Andrew's in Scotland.

Since I was on my own, after we finished our laundry we decided to grab some food and hang out. We laughed and talked and had fun! It was the first time in Venice that I was able to communicate with people who “spoke my language.” We discussed music, museums, books, other traveling we had done. They were off to Prague the next day. I was so excited and exhilarated by the chance meeting I had the need to stay in touch, especially with Jamie.

I gave him my email address. And of course (I guess it's the writer in me, always searching for a story) I wonder . . . in years to come will I marry Jamie? Will he be the one? We'll keep in touch—casually at first, emails, cards, then letters, maybe awkward phone calls—visits to Washington and Mississippi—London, or wherever we may end up. And then he blooms into the gorgeous boy/man he is to become; and I settle down—I become ready to settle and we choose each other.

And the story will go that I met the love of my life, the father of my children, my husband at a laundromat in Venice, Italy, when we were both traveling, and in school, and he was twenty-one, and I was thirty-three. It would be such a story of serendipity. Some say it's a smell that attracts people to each other, whether it be friends or lovers; I tend to agree but I think it has to be followed by something magnetic and conversational.

Shannon leaves in the morning and I get to stay two more days in Venice on my own. I am beyond elated! There are exhibits I have jotted down that I want to go to, neighborhoods I've come across that I want to revisit, and experiences I wanted to have. I felt like, with Shannon, I couldn't really enjoy Venice in the way it was meant to be enjoyed. I wanted to stop and smell the sunshine, feel it on my face and in my hair, lie on my back near a canal and read a book for three hours. I wanted to lie down like all of the other backpackers I saw and take a beautiful nap. I wanted to have lunch from the grocery store: grapes, water, butter cookies, and yogurt.

For me Venice was a different sort of history lesson than Rome or Florence. The poet Ezra Pound was buried off the coast of Venice on the isle of San Michel. I learned that *the* "Casanova" was from Venice and became famous and synonymous with romance upon the publication of his autobiography, *The Story of My Life* by Giacomo Casanova di Seingalt. I learned that the most exquisite hand-blown glass came from Murano, an island across from Venice. I even got to see Harry's Bar, the famous watering hole that Hemingway frequented.

And the water, an entire book could be written about the water in Venice. Yes, it is what makes Venice Venice; and it also is what makes Venice magical. American writer Fran Lebowitz once said, “If you read a lot, nothing is as great as you’ve imagined. Venice is—Venice is better.” Being surrounded by water at all times, everywhere you go, every bridge you cross, any direction you look, you will see water. It shimmers coppery gold and sways languishingly. Since we were there in March, there wasn’t a smell; but I have heard that if you come during the summer months, the most popular for visiting Venice, it smells like shit because it is literally an open sewer. Thankfully, we missed this sensory detail. You are constantly surrounded by moving water. You feel like you are gently rocking all the time, like being on a slow moving sailboat on the calmest of waters. Whether walking the streets and bridges or getting in and out of water taxis, the water has a profound effect on your equilibrium and mood. It’s no wonder that Venice’s nickname is *La Serenissima* (the Most Serene).

My last few days in Venice were lazy and slow and perfect. I went to the Salvador Dali exhibit (“Salvador *who?*” Shannon had shrieked when I mentioned it before), I visited the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, and a photography exhibit. I ate, I read, I watched the water, and I listened to the lullaby that is Venice: the sound of moving water, people talking in Italian, and laughter.

I have concluded that there are unique rhythms for the three Italian cities I visited on my trip. *Roma* is for sightseeing and walking the streets; *Firenze* is for



shopping and eating great meals, and *Venezia* is for relaxing, absorbing the beauty, listening to and watching the water, seeing art, and reading.

\* \* \*

This life of travel seemed to suit me. In foreign countries I felt at home, in my skin. I was truly happy. Not just on the surface but deep down inside, at my deepest core. I didn't want this to end; I wanted to keep going, keep traveling, learning, exploring. I went into an internet café and researched my university's study abroad website. They listed English programs in Australia, England, and Wales. I filled out the application, wrote my personal statement, and requested Wales. I already had a trip planned for England later in the semester. Australia was somewhere I thought I would get to eventually, but Swansea, Wales was somewhere that I never knew existed. I wanted to go there.

## CHAPTER 4

### Mon Amie, Chloe

Blois, France

I was jarred into reality on my return to France. A series of train rides and a plane landed me at Paris' *Charles de Gaulle* Airport. Having missed the last train back to *Pontlevoy*, I spent the night at the airport, sitting upright in a holding area for none hours, hugging my bags tight to me in case I was robbed. The lights were fluorescent and bright, the TV blaring; needless to say, I got little non-REM sleep.

Dazed as I was, I'm not sure how I made it onto the train the next morning. After about an hour I realized I was on the wrong train. After three more false-starts—yes, I became so disoriented that I did this over and over and over again—I was beyond frustrated. A two-hour taxi ride is how I finally arrived back at the Abbey. I was dirty, grumpy, and mad at myself for spending 184 euro on the taxi ride. When Audrey saw me, she gave me an enormous mothering hug and said, “You look like you’ve been in a fight.”

I laughed.

“How was your trip?” Audrey asked.

“Loved Italy,” I said, “hated my travel partner.”

After I showered and unpacked, Audrey and I spent a few hours catching up on all the details, both good and bad, of our trips. While Audrey had enjoyed Ireland and Amsterdam, we both agreed that if we had it to do over again, we would have

traveled together. It was then and there that we made a pact to do just that, travel together every weekend, no matter where, no matter what.

That night I was happy to be back “home,” at the Abbey, and in my postage-stamp sized room, in my own single bed. I slept soundly.

\* \* \*

It is Tuesday, after Spring Break and I have come to *Blois* with my host-friend, Chloe. She is a few years younger than me, is married, and has just had a baby. *Blois* is an enchanting city about a half an hour’s drive from *Pontlevoy*. Framed on one side by a vast and silent river, is a perfect mixture of old and new. There are many cafes, restaurants, and boutiques interwoven with medieval bridges and archaic churches.

We are at a café about to have lunch. We have spent the day shopping. Chloe has bought me copies of Baudelaire and Rimbaud (my all-time favorite!) and Victor Hugo in French. I cannot read them but will treasure them just the same. I bought a Carla Bruni CD to replace the one I seemed to have lost during my recent travels. Chloe crinkles her face when she sees the CD. I look at her much the same way as she purchases a Backstreet Boys CD, telling me it is very “famous, *non?*”

“It is not correct,” she scolds as I try and communicate to the waiter that I

would like a coffee now, *before* we eat. She tries to indoctrinate me into the *French* way of doing things—coffee *after* the meal. But I am cold, and I want my coffee *now*. She has ordered pizza for us, which still baffles me, pizza being so prominent in French gastronomy. Chloe is tall like a model with a thin face. She complains that she has not yet lost her baby weight. “I cannot enter my trousers,” she says with a smile of embarrassment.

“Do you want to have more children?” I asked her when we first met.

“*Non*, I don’t like to evacuate the baby,” she said and she shook her head almost viciously at me.

The pizza arrives topped with green beans, a fried egg, and a thick layer of *crème fraîche*. *Mmmm*, the stereotypical French pizza—Pizza Hut, it is not. Chloe digs in, asking for more *crème fraîche*, and I eat the parts that I can stomach.

Chloe picks me up every Tuesday and we hang out. Sometimes we have lunch and go shopping in a neighboring city to *Pontlevoy*, like *Amboise* or *Loshe*. Other times we go to her house and “take tea.” She has even taken me to the grocery store or to do errands, like getting film developed at the *Super Marche*, the French equivalent to Wal-Mart. I met her through the Abbey; we were assigned to each other in a “cultural hosting” capacity. I really lucked out that she is young. Most of the other students ended up with grandmas and grandpas who don’t speak a word of English. While Chloe, I think, speaks it quite well, considering.

I am supposed to be helping her with her English, correcting her if she makes

grammatical errors or mispronunciations. We are supposed to be helping each other with our new languages of English and French. In her English courses they teach the most literal and precise translations, which make for great (I think) conversational nuances. She says things like, “it’s complicate,” and one night while we were out drinking she said, “Gin and my English, it’s not so good.” I usually don’t correct her because her sentences make me laugh. And she knows this, when I smile she is aware she has made a mistake, but then I say, “No, no, that was correct.”

To me, she is very French. As a girl, she lived in Paris (which she pronounces “*Pare-eess*”), went to school in the French countryside, and summered in the south of France. She is *tres chic*, wrapping her scarf in that undeniably French way, a single flip, and *Voila*—culture.

Her husband Jean-Luc looks like Johnny Depp, well, sort of like Johnny Depp. He is nice and simple and laughs at us when we speak English in front of him. He is embarrassed because he knows only French. His eyes are blue and round, like robin’s eggs, and he has tanned skin like an Italian.

Even though we are newly acquainted—new friends—Chloe and I are very similar. We both love books, have revealing personalities, and we both have wry senses of humor. I know that we will be friends for the rest of our lives. Just like with Audrey—she is a kindred spirit, we are cut from the same glass, jagged and see-through.

Chloe is adopted and is the love of her mother's life. She had a sister who died a decade before her father passed a few years after that. Now, it is just her mother and her and of course, Jean-Luc and their daughter, Fleur, which means gorgeously, "flower." Her mother has worn the same size for thirty years, which I find extremely French. And she has a boyfriend who is twenty-five years younger than she, also *tres French*. She looks like Catherine Deneuve in old photos I've seen, and still wears her dyed blonde hair in a perfect *chinois*.

Chloe and I talk easily and openly. She has told me that she and Jean-Luc have had issues since the birth of Fleur. When she gave a detailed description of her wedding day two years before, it sounded so beautiful, so elegant that I asked her if she had cried? She said, "*Non*, I cry now." I sympathize and share stories of my own life, my own loves that have gone away.

As we were having our coffee and sharing an *ile flottante* (floating island), a light custard topped with poached meringue, I asked her what she wanted from Barcelona, where I'll be heading with Audrey and another Abbey-ite the coming weekend. Whenever I have traveled, I always bring her small gifts: chocolates from Paris, stationery from Florence, and a wine cork from Rome.

"*Surprenderme*," she says with a thankful smile. Surprise me.

## CHAPTER 5

### *A Book, a Rose, and an Almost-Married Man* Barcelona

We arrived in Barcelona on *La Diada de Sant Jordi* (St. Jordi Day). The streets were packed with people, many carrying books and roses. For some reason, I had it in my head that Barcelona was a sleepy port town, that the pace in would be slow: “*manana, manana*” (tomorrow, tomorrow) supposedly being the country’s motto. But when we stepped off the train and left the station, we were inundated with hordes of people; in a bustling metropolis.

St. Jordi is the patron saint of Catalonia, the region of Spain where Barcelona lies. The St. Jordi Day celebration is of love and books, a kind of literary Valentine’s Day. Makeshift book stalls are set up along Barcelona’s most famous street, *Las Ramblas*, a shady tree-lined promenade. Beautiful burgundy-red roses are everywhere. By the end of the day, some four million roses and some 400,000 books will have been purchased.

As we made our way to our hotel off of *Las Ramblas*, we perused the books stalls, were given roses by generous Catalan men, and stopped to watch the street performers dressed in elaborate costumes of glitter, gold, and feathers.

Audrey and I had invited Lolly to come along with us to Barcelona. Lolly was a musical prodigy from Texas. She’d put out a CD and played gigs all over Texas. Her songs were haunting and intelligent, way beyond her seventeen years. Besides

the fact that she can sing and she brings her guitar with her wherever she goes (including here!), she has a fashion sense that baffles. She can often be seen in her favorite brightly tie-dyed “Keep Austin Weird” t-shirt, matched with a skirt so short it bordered on obscene. But she didn’t look slutty or crass; she just looked seventeen, in the best possible sense of the word.

By the time we arrived in Barcelona, after a twelve-hour night train, we were absolutely shattered. Although we’d booked into sleeping couchettes, it is hard to feel refreshed after spending the night on a moving train. The hard, army-style bunk beds with barely an inch-thick mattress; the woolen and scratchy blankets; the constant jerking of the train, and sleeping in your street clothes, make for a fitful night’s sleep.

What is that saying—when in Barcelona do as the Barcelonans do? Once we reached the hotel, we decided to partake in the Spanish practice *siesta*, usually taken between the hours of two and four.

After our *siesta*, we were ready to eat and explore the city. We found a *tapas* bar on the promenade and had a late lunch. I was surprised at the menu. Growing up in Texas, I ate Mexican food at least three times a week; so I was looking forward to the food in Spain. What I didn’t realize was how different Spanish food was from Mexican food. Because Barcelona lies on the Mediterranean coast, it was seafood more than beef that dominates the flavors. Fried calamari, marinated anchovies, salted cod; it wasn’t the cheesy, gooey food I was expecting. I settled on a *chorizo*-and-bread dish, and Audrey and I shared seafood *paella*. Lolly, who is allergic to



seafood, ate only bread. And because the coffee was so unexpectedly bad, I had to duck into the Starbucks around the corner for a *doppio con panna*.

Barcelona is a city famous for surrealist and eccentric artists: Salvador Dali, Gaudi, Miro, and Picasso, all of whom have lived and worked in the city. We walked along *Las Ramblas*. I was searching for *Nov de la Rambla #6*, the address Pablo Picasso kept in Barcelona. I tried to imagine the *Las Ramblas* neighborhood that the famous Spaniard walked along. It was when Franco took power in 1947 that Picasso left Spain for good. Either due to my remedial Spanish or my abysmal sense of direction, I was never able to find his apartment. We took a leisurely stroll toward the port, stopping along the way to listen to buskers and to watch street performers—pantomimed statues coming alive with the toss of a euro into their money jar.

Spanish poet Jorge Luis Borges once wrote that Barcelona was “ugly, vulgar, strident. Rectangular and a filthy city.” This was not my impression of the city at all. Instead I saw beauty and art and good-looking men. We noticed one stag party after another cloistered together over drinks and smokes along the shady streets of *Las Ramblas*. Who knew that Barcelona was the place to spend your last few days of singledom?

At the port we lay down on the dock and enjoyed the last bits of the fading sun. There was a breeze coming off the sea, the air smelled ripe with salt and sea life, alive and fragrant. I closed my eyes and listened to the waves sloshing back and forth

at the break. *This is a great way to spend a late afternoon*, I thought, not engaging in conversation, just silently enjoying this moment of happiness. We stayed until the sun set completely and the air turned.

After getting ice cream, we ended the night early. We stopped into an Irish bar next to our hotel for spiced coffee drinks. Despite the caffeine we all fell asleep without washing our faces or showering. It had been a perfect first day in Barcelona.

Antoni Gaudi's hands seem to have touched almost all of Barcelona. A modernist architect, he left a definable impression on this city. Audrey and I went to Gaudi Park, which overlooks the city below while Lolly slept. It is a nature walk interspersed with sculptures by the famous artist. I bought Chloe mosaic magnets and a writing pen inspired by Gaudi's unusual style. After walking the park from one end to the other and back again, Audrey and I headed down into the city to visit Gaudi's masterpiece.

If you have a vivid imagination and are familiar with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, you may be able to visualize Gaudi's unfinished masterpiece: the *Sagrada Familia* Church, a stunning spectacle that resembles dripping wet sand with winding spires and colorful mosaic tiles. It was started in 1882 and has been under continuous construction ever since. The finish date is estimated for 2025, but that is only a guesstimate—the Spanish motto, "*manana, manana*" comes to mind.

Audrey and I arrived back at the hotel hot and sweaty and ready to fall over. We entered the hotel room just as Lolly was waking up.

“I’m ready to go out,” she declared as she wiped sleep from her eyes. That was the last thing on my mind. My ideal night would have been to take a steaming hot shower and lay in bed reading until I fell asleep. Audrey and I had come across a book store earlier that had Spanish authors translated into English. I bought a book of Lorca poems and was excited to read the Spanish alongside the English translations. I looked over at Audrey who looked as if she was thinking along the same lines.

After some prodding by the now fully awake and excited Lolly, we decided we would indeed go out. It was our last night in Barcelona, we had a train in the morning and could sleep the whole twelve-hour journey back to France; why not? We dressed to make the most of it. We showered, doused ourselves in various fruity and musky scents, and dressed as if we were on display. We were going have fun, *dammit!*

It was when Lolly ordered a “carbomb” at the Irish pub that I knew we were in for a bumpy night.

“That isn’t funny, miss,” the bartender scowled.

“You know, a *carbomb*—Bailey’s and whiskey, dropped into a Guinness?” Lolly explained.

“Yeah, I know what it is, but you’re out of line.”

Audrey and I dragged Lolly away from the bar as we tried to explain to her that it probably wasn’t politically correct to order a “carbomb” in Europe, from an Irish bartender.

“Whatever,” Lolly said unfazed, “I’ll have a Corona.”

Before coming to Europe I had no idea what a “carbomb” drink even was

nevermind why it would be controversial. I had gotten a quick course in European and British history and politics being in France. I was aware of things now that I never thought about twice before. The word “carbomb,” to me, in Mississippi, California, Texas, had no real meaning, it was an abstraction. But in Europe, it was real, it was near, it was personal. It was one of the many lessons I learned: the significance of what seemed like faraway news in America affected people’s everyday lives; people that I came in contact with.

We soon left the Irish bar and searched the side streets off of *Las Ramblas* looking for another place to hang. We tried a hippie bar, another Irish bar, and a weird druggie 1980’s bar—nothing clicked. Audrey and I were ready to call it a night, but we also wanted Lolly to have her fun. She has this thing about kissing a guy from every country she visits. Apparently this is not unique to Lolly; we had heard stories about some of the other Abbey-ites either kissing or full-on “hooking up” whenever they landed in a new country. And so far none of the bars we had been to had any “cute boys” according to Lolly.

We were forced to head to the ultra-touristy port area. (Why is it when you are in a foreign country you try not to go to the “tourist areas,” even though you are in fact a tourist?) As we walked along the docks, heard the heavy bass of American hip-hop music, and saw swarms of testosterone-laden stag party groups, we knew that we had found what we were looking for.

We stood in line behind a stag group full of well-groomed English guys with faux-hawked hairdos, gelled and messy but with precision, linen pants, leather sandals, and lots of personality. They kept referring to us as “American birds.” And did I mention the *English accents*?

Inside the darkened club, thick with smoke and throbbing lights, we hung with the Brits for a bit and had a drink. They soon left and we headed for the dance floor. You have to be careful dancing at a club in the port area of Barcelona. It is like dancing in a sea of octopus, hands coming from every direction, grabbing, tugging, begging you to *come over here . . .*

It was like drowning in hands and heavy breaths. I don’t drink and I am not really a fan of being pawed by drunken strangers, so I headed back to the bar for a Diet Coke. I left Audrey, who is an amazing and accomplished dancer, and Lolly, who had found someone to make out with, on the dance floor.

After a few more songs, Lolly and Audrey, both drenched with sweat, met me at the bar.

“Let’s get outta here,” Lolly said.

“What happened to your guy?” I asked.

“He’s kissing someone else,” she said as she ordered another shot of Limoncello.

“Oh,” I said. And so goes the nightlife in Barcelona, I thought.

A few doors down, we found another club playing American music. The first people we saw when we entered the club were the British stag party guys from before.

We joined their table right away. There were five of them, all from southern England near the Welsh border. They were in their late twenties and worked for the British Rail System. Their “mate,” Paul, was getting married in two weeks to his high school girlfriend.

Lolly found someone in the group to make-out with, Audrey was “dirty dancing” on the dance floor with another guy from the group, and I was talking to the Stag, Paul. His two other “mates” were trolling the bar for available females.

“I’m sticking with you.” I said to Paul. “You’re the only safe one here.” I explained to him the climate of hands and heat at the other bar and that I wasn’t in the mood to deal with that. I wanted to just relax and chill out; I didn’t want any shenanigans. I was sticking with the “almost married guy.”

“Okay,” he said, like a gentleman.

A little while later, the Notorious B.I.G. hit “Hypnotize” came blaring from the sound system, heavy with bass. Paul and I jumped up and joined the others dancing. The song played, “ . . . *Biggie, Biggie, Biggie, can’t you see. Sometimes your words just hypnotize me. And just love your flashy ways . . .* ”

The next song was a slow number by Erykah Badu, so Paul and I awkwardly agreed, with a head nod, to dance together. The song progressed, danced a little closer. When he pulled me in tight, I pushed back and looked at him: he was amazingly attractive: he had spikey blonde hair and pale blue eyes; and he was built like a European football player, trim and toned. And then we started to kiss, right

there on the dance floor in front of everyone. I hear an “Oh my God!” from Lolly; Paul and I break apart and laugh. The close dancing and making-out continues through the evening. It has become unofficially official: we are a couple for the rest of the evening.

We stayed at the club until it closed at 5 a.m. We all left in couples: me and Paul, Audrey and Lolly each with a member of Paul’s stag party. We decided to go for a walk and watch the sun come up.

It was while sitting on a bench on the promenade of *Las Ramblas* that Paul started asking me about fate and destiny. He held my hand tight and told me I was a princess, that he couldn’t believe he had met me. I told him he was being naughty and this was crazy. He said how moments happen, unexpected bits in life, how sometimes fate intervenes in unexpected ways. I said—true—it does happen. That’s when he asked me about the movie *Serendipity*, had I seen it?

“Yes,” I said. “Of course, it was great.”

“I think that’s us, me and you,” he said. “I could call off my wedding; you are in control.”

“What about your fiancée?”

“She’s nothing like you. I feel like I am in a dream with you.”

“This is a dream,” I say, “It’s not real. We are not supposed to be doing this in the first place; I don’t even live here, I live in America, this is not real, this is crazy.”

We watched the sun come up over the port. He continued his pleas of kismet, destiny, and forever. I felt honored, and he truly seemed sincere, but to me this was a

night, a fluke, a story I will tell later. I told him to remember tonight with fondness, a last moment of spontaneity, but I was leaving in a few hours, and that was that. "I'm sorry," I said.

He walked me back to the hotel, we kissed for the last time, and I went up and collapsed into bed. Audrey and Lolly were already asleep. It was 7 a.m. Needless to say, we missed our early morning train back to France.



## CHAPTER 6

### *When I Die, I Want to Go to Harrod's* London

Dewy pink cheeks, grey skies, crisp air, Burberry umbrellas, British cream tea, red buses and phone booths, old-timey black taxi cabs. Many images come to me when I think of London. To me, it is New York City with history and a British accent.

Audrey's mom was meeting her in Paris this weekend, so I decided to go to London with Becky, the girl who lived across the hall from us at the Abbey. We took the Chunnel in from Paris. And, yes, I feel incredibly transcontinental saying things like "we took the Chunnel." We checked into a questionable bed & breakfast that looked gorgeous and cheap online but in real life, appeared cheap. And it was in Hammersmith, which is by no means the most convenient place from which to light while visiting the hotspots of London. Becky and I had forty-eight hours to explore all of London.

\* \* \*

Mohammad Al-Fayed is a genius. He is a genius for many reasons: he owns the Ritz Hotel in Paris; he has incredibly bad taste. (He is the father of Dodi Al-Fayed, who died with Princess Diana; and because of this he has erected an "eternal flame" on the bottom floor of Harrod's next to a bronze sculpture of the couple

dancing, with flying doves); and he is a genius because he owns Harrod's Department Store in London.

If you have never been to Harrod's, you must go, it is the experience of a lifetime. They pride themselves on providing *anything* that their customer could ever desire: chocolate, books, furniture, travel agents, toys, banking, sausages—they even sell freshly made Krispy Kreme doughnuts. I'm from the South, I *know* my Krispy Kremes! In the Harrod's brochure is a story about a customer who allegedly tried to make the store hit a snag in their supreme service: the gentleman ordered an elephant; could Harrod's deliver? To Harrod's credit, an elephant was indeed delivered to the customer, along with a bill of sale!

Harrod's is the department store to beat all department stores. It is like walking around in a pinball machine. Like a pinball you are pegged and pulled, bounced and slung into a million different directions, all of them tempting, all of them alluring. It would take a month to go through every department with care. Becky and I spent our morning zig-zagging our way through as much of Harrod's as we could, cutting through throngs of people and selecting trinkets embossed with the green and gold Harrod's logo.

We wanted to have a traditional British lunch, and we wanted to go to a pub. We happened by Sherlock Holmes's Pub. It seemed "British enough," so we went in. It was like walking into the billiards room in the game Clue. Dark wood-paneled walls, bulky parlor room furniture and yellowed mirrors dominated like paintings in a museum, only hung with less care.

This was to be our first “British meal,” so what else could we do but order the stereotypically English dishes of shepherd’s pie and fish & chips? Shepherd’s pie, a casserole-type dish made of minced lamb and mashed potatoes, tastes like a perfect combination of ass and foot. It was awful. The fish & chips tasted like soggy and salted imitations of their American counterparts of fried fish filet and fries. Perhaps dessert would be better? I chose spongy pudding; Becky ordered the spotted dick. You have to hand it to the British; they have a reputation for their wry and quirky sense of humor for a reason. The spotted dick looked like, well, a spotted dick, only it tasted like ginger and nutmeg. Spongy pudding could have just as easily been called wet, soggy, tasteless cake. Perhaps our trip to London would be without culinary excitement?

After lunch, we went on a walking tour of the Covent Garden section of London. While this is now a very hip and fashionable area in which to shop and eat, it used to be a fruit and vegetable market, most famously used for Eliza Doolittle’s opening scene in the movie version of *My Fair Lady*. Now, they have every kind of shop: stationers, accessory vendors, brand-name chain stores, a travel bookstore, a Lush bath products store, and all sorts of carts selling hats, scarves, and anything you could want to eat. We bought newsboy caps like Madonna wears, chocolates from Thornton’s, pashminas in sea-foam green and aqua, sunny yellows, and midnight blue. After shopping we hopped on the Piccadilly line of the Tube, London’s famous

underground train, and headed toward Hyde Park Corner station, across from The Dorchester Hotel.

We were booked for afternoon cream tea at 4 p.m. at The Dorchester, arguably the most famous hotel in London. I think it rivals The Plaza in Manhattan or The Ritz in Paris for pure opulence and satin service. Becky had never been to a hotel like The Dorchester. The large gilded rooms, the taffeta sofa cushions, the well-dressed waiters clamoring to assist with your every need.

Today is Becky's birthday—she is twenty, and she is such a good girl, so different than I was at her age. She was in Honor Society in high school, she was secretary of her student class, and she is still a virgin! I envy her; not that I want to *be* her, but I envy her wide-eyed innocence, her wide-eyed view of the world, of love, of life. She even *looks* innocent: white blonde hair, cornflower blue eyes, full cheeks, and a milk-white smile. There is so much of the world she has yet to learn. Even at that age, I was already tinged with surliness, looking for trouble.

Over tea and coffee, warmed currant scones, thick and gloppy Devonshire cream, and strawberry jam, Becky told me stories about her boyfriend Jeb. They met at a fraternity-sorority mixer and have been together for almost a year. And they want to marry each other. *Aaahhhh*—young love.

I think it may be better to fall in love when you're young like them because they're so open and the love is so pure—it's not based on money or status, or life goals—it's just based on the "act of being in love"—on cuteness, on sweetness, on roses and love letters, not rent, life insurance, and bills. There is little "real life"

involved. By the time that comes into play, they will have already had the good times—are already in love—they don't have to try and fall in love under "real-life" circumstances.

She asks me why I'm not married. It's a question that still takes me by surprise. It seemed only a few years ago nobody cared that I wasn't married. As a matter of fact, it would have been considered inappropriate or irresponsible for me to have married in my twenties. My parents would have freaked. First I would need an education, a proper job, and then consider marriage. And as much as I used to reject the idea of the Old Maid or the "single-woman-in-her-thirties-and-is-desperate-to-marry" character that seems to be the heroine of nearly every "chick-lit" phenom—it was strangely becoming a presumed stereotype of my life.

I never know how I am supposed to answer this question. Because it usually seems the person is asking out of pity rather than curiosity. *Prozac Nation* writer and literary provocateur Elizabeth Wurtzel says when she started getting this question—immediately after turning thirty—she would usually respond with the equally intrusively inappropriate and ephemeral question, "Why aren't you thin?"

My go-to answer is always, "I don't know, I'm just not." But I always feel like I have to defend myself—both as a woman and as a potential mate. Was the question *really* being asked "What is wrong with you?" Or, more pointedly, *Why has no one wanted to marry you?*

As I listen to Becky tell me stories about pink and red M&M's and stuffed teddy bears, I realize how young twenty really is. So perhaps I have made the right decision of staying single, until I grew up.

I always tell myself (and other people) that had I married in my twenties I would be divorced by now, and it's true. My high school boyfriend proposed, I said no. He was moving to Europe, and I was heading to college in Mississippi. There was no backing out, and I guess I also knew, somewhere within me, that it would never work. My college boyfriend also proposed, although I think it was more out of overzealous obsession than true love. I simply did not feel the same way, so how could I say yes?

The ones I wanted to marry, the ones I felt certain about, never wanted to marry me. And that in itself was another kind of gift. Tim, the boy I fell head over heels with while working in a ski town in Colorado, now lives alone in a trailer with three huge Siberian huskies, and does the same job for \$10 bucks an hour. (He is still cute, though.) And then there was Michael, the absolute love of my life. We were Liz Taylor & Richard Burton, Bogie & Bacall, Sid & Nancy, and *Nine & ½ weeks* all rolled into one. Passionate, fiery, lusty, desperate, complicated, messy, dramatic. He did propose, I accepted, and he walked out of my life unexpectedly. He disappeared and I've never heard from him again. This too, was for the best. Today I would have been like his first wife: an angry, unhappy, divorced single mother. I am better off alone. Alone, and in Europe. I have a freedom that I wouldn't have had otherwise. Yes, I think life does work out for the best. And of course I believe in love: I am

always happy when my friends find it, and sad when it goes away. But for now, I am alone, and I am happy. This is a lesson that I learned in Europe while talking with Becky. It was because I was talking to someone her age that I was able to reflect and ponder the happenings of my own life. Being out of my comfort zone, age and otherwise, was giving me a fresh view of choices that I have made. This was big for me. I was no longer apologetic for my singledom; I was proud. For me, for now, it was absolutely the right choice.

Becky and I had to drag ourselves away from our conversation in order to make our theatre obligations. We were going to see *The Phantom of the Opera*, in London's famed West End. I had seen it before, in Los Angeles, and hated it. It just seemed boring and too fantastical for me. But it was Becky's favorite show, so I said, why not? And I loved it. It was as if I were seeing a completely different show. Could it be that seeing it in London made it better?

\* \* \*

We spent our last full day in London on a big red tour bus. We saw everything: London Bridge, Tower Bridge, Piccadilly Circus (which is London's equivalent to Times Square in New York City), the River Thames, Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, and 10 Downing Street where the Prime Minister resides. We even got to see the Changing of the Guard ceremony at Buckingham Palace. At the Palace gift

shop, I bought tea towels for my mom, shortbread cookies imported from Scotland, and a throw pillow stitched with the Union Jack.

We hopped off of the tour bus to go to Westminster Abbey. I had no idea that people were actually buried there. I knew that it was famous and old and that Princess Diana's funeral was held there, but I didn't realize that it held so many famous dead people. The Abbey was built between 1045-1050 by King Edward, the Confessor. All British monarchs since 1066 have been coronated there. The coronation throne, King Edward's Chair, is even on display. And it doesn't look at all regal. It is small and made of wood. I would even say it was plain without even a glimmer of majestic opulence. Many monarchs, including Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots, are laid to rest there. Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Ben Jonson, Dickens, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Kipling, and even Chaucer are all buried there.

Our next stop was the Tower of London. Built along the banks of the River Thames by William the Conqueror originally as a palace and fortress in 1078, it has become more known for who was imprisoned and sent to their deaths. Ann Boleyn was famously executed in the Tower as well as Lady Jane Grey. And then there are the ravens. Legend has it that if the ravens ever leave the Tower of London, the monarchy and London itself will fall. There have been at least six ravens at the Tower for centuries. Today there are nine ravens, with clipped wings, being tended to by an official Ravenmaster.

I was disappointed when the tour guide told us that the story of Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, was only a myth. I had always thought he was a



real person like Jack the Ripper. We ended up spending over eight hours on the bus, getting on and off to visit the various sites. After to tour, we headed back to Hammersmith to find somewhere to eat.

According to a conversation I had with the tour bus driver, the national dish of Great Britain is an Indian dish, chicken tikka masala. Indian food is to the Brits what Chinese or Mexican is to Americans, the go-to foreign food. We found a bizarre Indian restaurant called Agni near the bed & breakfast. Luckily for me, chicken tikka masala is my favorite Indian dish and the only main dish I ever order. Becky tried the chicken nawabi, with a curry and cinnamon sauce. We also got raita, malabar vegetable curry, and bukharu naan. Because of this meal, full of spices, and sweetness, bold colors, and pungently exotic aromas, along with the licorice candies they brought out for dessert, my lasting impression of food in London is good: no, not good, excellent.

\* \* \*

Wouldn't you know, now the sun is shining, just as we are leaving . . . such is life. It was raining, cold, even a few snow flurries over the weekend but it was magnificent—the perfect London weather—brisk, clean. And my skin feels so soft and pink.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Cultural Anthropology and Six-Pack Sex* Interlaken, Switzerland

Audrey and I lay in a field today of grass and wildflowers, below vast mountains. The air was crisp, the sky bright blue, the mountains snow-capped. The air smelled like fresh-cut grass and rain, like new earth.

Last night Audrey and I arrived in Interlaken. It was our last trip of the semester, and we were in the market for some adventure. We came here to jump off the top of a mountain. Interlaken was famous for para-gliding, which entails running and jumping off of a high mountain and flying around in a parachute with no engine, using only the air thermals (and your tandem instructor) to negotiate the way.

Interlaken means “between the lakes,” taken from the Latin *inter lacus*. It is located in the middle of Switzerland between lakes *Thun* and *Brienz*. The resort town is dwarfed by mountain ranges on all sides, the most famous being the *Jungfrau*. People who seek thrills can find what they are looking for in Interlaken. They offer everything from canyoning to skydiving to hang gliding. We were staying at Balmer’s Herberge Hostel, famous among travelers and adventure-seekers.

Balmer’s is unlike any hotel or hostel I had ever encountered. It was built in the Swiss chalet style and has a cozy cabin feel. The rooms are decorated in red and white gingham-checked bedspreads and curtains. The hostel has an in-house store, a

restaurant, a bar called Metro, and staff from all over the world: Australia, America, Africa, and Europe. Balmer's is a community of and for travelers.

Our para-gliding trip was scheduled for early this morning. We got suited up, strapped to our tandem instructors, and were told to run, run, run, on one . . . two . . . three . . . *jump!* It was like floating, like being a feather dropped from the sky, gliding easily back and forth along the thermal winds. It was from this view that I was able to see the tiny village of Interlaken nestled between two massive green lakes. The ride down took about twenty minutes. Audrey and I were taking pictures of the mountains, the town below, and each other. The only time my stomach flipped was when my instructor wanted to do some tricks. Was I up for it?

"Sure," I said, "No problem." But I couldn't hang, it was too much, he did a few maneuvers that made us sideways, paralleling the earth, and made my stomach go queasy. I had to tell him to stop, that maybe I wasn't that adventurous after all.

We landed with ease, kissed the ground (apparently it is a tradition), and said goodbye to our instructors. We spent the rest of the morning walking around the village, buying Swiss army knives, Swiss chocolates, and anything we could find with the red and white Swiss flag on it. It was during lunch at Balmer's restaurant that we met a group of base jumpers. (Base-jumping involves jumping off of a fixed object like a bridge, building, or mountain side with only a parachute.) Bryan was a farmer from Australia, John was from Northern England, and Nick was from Spain. Anyone of them could have been a professional model. They all had rugged good looks and athletic builds. They knew each other because of the amazing base-jumping

mountains outside of Interlaken where they had met years before. They were going for a jump after lunch. Did we want to watch? How could we say no—we said, “Yes, of course, we’d love to!”

That’s how Audrey and I ended up lying in a field—we were waiting for the base jumpers to take the hour-long tram up to the top of the mountain. We were equipped with walkie-talkies to communicate with the jumpers and to alert them if we saw any police. Because base-jumping was illegal and considered one of the most dangerous adrenaline-filled sports, this was of utmost importance. If the police had found them, they would have been arrested and fined. The jump came off without a hitch (read: no one died), we headed back to Balmer’s to shower and get ready to go out. We agreed to meet later.

At the bar, Metro we sat at a table with the base jumpers and met the most interesting people: two skydiving instructors from New Zealand, and Riann and John. Riann is a native of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) teaches skiing and snowboarding; and John is an American from New Hampshire who now lives in Interlaken and works as a river guide and wilderness expert. Audrey called him “Ken Doll” because he had blue eyes and blonde hair and looked like he could be on the cover of *Outside* magazine; I thought he looked like a younger version of Viggo Mortenson. We talked to them for a while before heading to another bar up the street at a hostel called the Funny Farm.

Almost all of the girls we've met here are American students studying abroad. That's all we've run into. I guess considering the amount of (good-looking) men around here, it makes sense.

The Funny Farm was full of very young American travelers, smoking clove cigarettes, and wearing tiny clothes even though it was forty degrees outside. Within an hour we were back at Balmer's and the Metro bar.

The others had left, but Riann and John were still there so we sat with them at the bar. Audrey was feeling frisky and wanted to do a tequila shot, so I told Riann and John to do one with her. When the three shots appeared on the bar, John asked Riann, "Are we doing the stunt tequila shot?"

Audrey and I had no idea what they were talking about. They poured salt onto the bar and began cutting it into lines like rails of cocaine, then asked the bartender for two straws.

"Ready?" John asks Riann.

"Ready," Riann replies.

In one rapid motion, they whip off their shirts, standing bare backed in the crowded bar. They bend down and snort the lines of salt off of the bar; they gulp the tequila, hold their heads back, and squeeze the lemons into both eyes, which were wide open! Stunned, Audrey and I turned to face the bartender, who didn't even react; she acted as if she had seen this before, a million times. Audrey and I are absolutely flabbergasted. It was like seeing someone light themselves on fire in front of you, like your eyes were playing tricks on you; it was hard to comprehend what just

happened. It was so unexpected, crazy, and unbelievable. But the bottom line is—they made a point and an impression! Later Audrey, an anthropology major, would call this a mating ritual.

So the four of us—Audrey, Riann, John, and me—hung out and talked for the rest of the evening, laughing and joking. Audrey and me listened to their adventure stories from various countries they had traveled to. The bar closed at midnight so we went to another up the road. It was on the walk over that we split off into pairs: me and John, Audrey and Riann.

The bar was hot, sweaty, and crowded. Reggae music was playing loudly; the room was thick with cigarette and marijuana smoke. John stood close to me holding onto my waist, pressing up against me, and I felt it in my toes. When he talked to me, I could feel his breath on my lips. He was making my eyeballs sweat. I was so hot, I thought I was going to pass out. We were surrounded by throngs of perspiring dancers and it was hard to breathe, the pheromones were overpowering me. I needed some air.

We moved to the front bar, which was practically empty. We sat down in a booth while Audrey and Riann sat at the bar and talked. John told me he needed to go home and go to bed.

“What are your plans for the rest of the evening?” he asked. I looked at my watch, it was 2 a.m.

“I don’t know,” I said. There was a prolonged silence.

“How would you feel about being kidnapped for the night?” he asked.

“You scare the fuck out of me,” I said.

“Like how?” he said, “I don’t want to scare you.”

“No,” I said, “Not like a monster, but you make me nervous.”

“In a good way?” he asked.

“Yes, I guess in a good way.”

More silence.

“Okay, that’s it, I’m kidnapping you tonight.”

“Okay,” I said. I went up to the bar, and told Audrey I was being kidnapped by the Ken Doll.

I was completely sober; I knew exactly what I was doing. I was going to a guy’s house that I met in a bar for no other reason than to get naked. We walked to Balmer’s where he picked up his bicycle and asked me about my balance, and then told me to sit on the handlebars. He drove me home on his bike a few blocks away.

We went into the kitchen. He had some water, and then pulled me toward him to kiss. I was nervous and afraid and started to laugh. We kissed awkwardly at first (I had gum in my mouth, and I threw it out) then we started to make out right there in the blaring light of the kitchen. After a few minutes, he took my hand and led me to his bedroom. I asked to use the restroom first, afterwards I went into the bedroom, sat on his bed, took off my Patagonia, and sat and waited while he peed. He came out of the restroom, turned out the bedroom light, and crawled on top of me. I kicked off my Nikes and the shenanigans began.

We made out for a while, he unbuttoned my jeans with extreme ease (they have a complicated button and zipper system), and maneuvered my body with knowledge and precision, gliding smoothly over all the right places. He was definitely an expert, fingers everywhere, holding me like six-pack or a bowling ball and using his mouth all at the same time. And then we fucked. It wasn't animalistic or over-the-top amazing like my last boyfriend, but it was extremely sexual and fulfilling and I felt appreciated for being a woman and for being there. After we both came, we lay calmly together intertwined, almost swallowing each other, sharing the same breath. It felt good, and natural, and deserved. We slept glued together all night until the phone rang.

Audrey had found me, which was a funny story in itself. She'd simply asked at the front desk at Balmer's. I guess they are used to missing roommates and travel partners who don't come home. They knew exactly who I was and whom I had gone home with, and dialed John's number and gave her the phone. We made plans to meet in a few minutes and make our 8:45 a.m. train. I don't even know his last name—and don't really care—don't really need to know it. He walked me back, kissed me goodbye, and then I ran off to meet Audrey.

What a night; what a weekend. I feel as though I lived a thousand days in this one weekend. And loved it. I want to come back and jump out of an airplane.



## CHAPTER 8

### *Au revoir, L'Abbaye*

#### Home

The weather has changed, long sunny days. Audrey and I went for a walk today around town. It is spring now so the shades of grey and brown that greeted us are gone. The fields are bright yellow and lavender. The wine stalks are full with leaves and the grass is the color of fresh seaweed. The birds chirp and lawnmowers can be heard off in the distance. The air smells fresh.

Life at the Abbey is at once chaotic and calm. This experience is winding down. I feel the heaviness of time, of trying to steal a moment here and there to catch my breath. My life in France is coming to an end and I will miss it. Deadlines are pressing against us: finals, papers, good-byes all crashing together at once. It's funny to me that I have taken to this school thing like I have. I am truly enjoying it, relishing in the language of books and language and history.

Our room is empty. The pictures down, the walls bare, our clothes, knickknacks, souvenirs . . . all packed, our suitcases overstuffed, and too heavy to lift. People have been leaving in small groups as opposed to the big swarm of people that arrived together three months ago. The good-byes haven't really been tearful or sad. The ones that I want to stay in touch with I know I will so it was easier to say goodbye. Others I wonder about, will we be in touch? I guess I'll know soon enough.

What I've learned about travel: (must haves)

\*good backpack

\*Spacebags

\*shower flops

\*CD player/Ipod

\*Ziploc bags—freezer bags/clothes; sandwich bags/toiletries

\*plug adaptors

What else have I learned other than what to pack into my suitcase? I know the difference now between a tourist and a traveler. A tourist sits tall in his chair like a gorilla ordering a Coke in loud English complaining about the lack of ice. A traveler blends in. Sits still, quiet, trying to go unnoticed, *aaahhhhh* but the teeth are too white, the smiles too animated, the white tennis shoes—all shout “American!” I aspire to be a traveler.

\* \* \*

It's 2 p.m.—Monday—Paris time. I am on the plane back to America, taxiing down the runway at *Charles de Gaulle*. I am ready to go home. I am ready to spend the summer in Mississippi, get back into a familiar routine so I will be ready to go again. I will be attending the University of Wales in Swansea in the fall. I will be there for four months. And I cannot wait to go and travel and have more adventures.

It's funny, my brother went to Paris once for two weeks during his freshman year of college. He said it was, "cool," and that was that. He has zero desire to return; it didn't affect him the way it has me. This experience was not only a lifelong dream of traveling and living in Europe realized, but it left a heavy imprint on me. I have discovered a new part of myself that I didn't know existed.

And so the answer to the question, "What are we all running from?" is exactly what my professor said it was, "we are running *to*, not from." It was blatantly obvious to me now. It was not for everyone, this wandering life, but for those of us that thirsted for something different, something other than the status quo, it was a godsend. Yes, we were running *to* something, we were running toward the life we had always secretly imagined.

I visited twenty-four cities and villages in seven countries. I attempted to speak several different languages with varying degrees of success. I learned how *chevre* (goat cheese) is made, I learned that all French wine is grown on grafted American stalks due to the Great French Wine Blight of the late 1800's, and I met the equivalent of Oprah's best friend Gayle, in Audrey. She said that it will be like losing a leg, my not being with her every second of almost every day. She jokingly refers to me as her wife. But I know that I will see her again, just as I will see Europe again. I am certain.

## Epilogue

As I write this I am sitting in the airport in Nagoya, Japan. It has been exactly four years since my time at the Abbey and in France. During the years post-Abbey, I have traveled to fifteen countries; some as seemingly far-flung and exotic as Thailand, Kenya, Czech Republic, and Hong Kong. I even spent time in Taipei, Taiwan as an English language teacher.

I have fallen in love with traveling the way a young girl falls in love with her future husband: totally, passionately, completely. And in the way that some girls dream of wedding dresses trimmed with imported lace and hand-sewn beads, linen embossed invitations, and honeymoons; I dream of countries. I want to go *everywhere*; to every single continent. I want to see a hundred countries before I die.

One of my most prized possessions is my passport which I keep in a pale blue leather holder. I love it more than almost anything else. It is marked with smudged, inky stamps, each one reminding me of adventures, missed flights and trains, and life-altering experiences, both big and small.

I have returned to France many times since my first trip there via a study abroad program. Chloe is still a close friend; she has even visited me in America. She is divorced from Jean-Luc, remarried, and expecting a sibling for Fluer.

Audrey and I are still thick-as-thieves, meeting up over the years in Manhattan, Britain, Hawaii, and Michigan. We still joke that we are like “Gayle & Oprah,” the bestest of friends. We are always looking for somewhere “cool” to meet up.

I no longer speak to Shannon.