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I arrived in London in the early morning and took my first step onto European ground at 23. The plane ride had been overnight from Boston, and I finally understood the origin of “red eye,” which I'd only known as a coffee term. I felt like putty in the hostel lobby where I'd be staying for the next two weeks, strung out from nerves yet ready to gobble up two cups of coffee and take a six hour nap simultaneously. But I'd done it, and this is probably what the putty-like feeling of relief came from the most: I'd traveled. Getting here, I told myself, had to be the hardest part.

Ever since I hit 18, I told anyone who asked me that I had no interest in traveling. Before 18, I'd wanted to go back to San Diego and explore more of the beaches. I'd wanted to go to Amsterdam and study in a castle, to see different people and try new foods. But I'd taken to saying there was nothing wrong with New England, that I'd be okay with staying there forever.

But I can't say, in retrospect, that this was entirely the truth. I'd watched my friends in college jet set across the globe, returning six months later with souvenirs of mustard and photos from the London Eye. My sister went to France at 21, where she got what was probably the first and last tan of her life. Rachel went to England at 20 and discovered, while she was there, that she wanted to become an architect, which she now is. Their travels seemed interesting and fulfilling, and when I was procrastinating on my own boring homework in the United States, I'd flip through their photos for hours. But I was afraid to leave the comforts of New Hampshire, where I'd grown up. I was afraid of cities, their maze-like streets threatening to engulf me. I was afraid of getting swallowed whole by them.

I've never been a city person, but in 2010 I went crazy in a city, which turned me off from them entirely. To Boston's credit, it wasn't the city that did me in. It was the bipolar disorder, but I didn't know that at the time. All I knew was that I expected that living in a new place—in this case Emerson

College—meant that I could run away from my problems, or leave them packed up in a box the same way I'd left the sweatshirts I didn't really want anymore behind at my parents' house. Instead, my issues came with me. They stayed up all night with me.

And some nights, at times like 4am, I would go down to the lounge on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, one floor below my own dorm room. I hadn't known, before moving to the city, that all of the lights still on—all of the people still awake like me—wouldn't make me feel any less alone. That instead, the pings of light just sparkled there in the cityscape like one more person I couldn't reach, stuck muffled behind the pane of glass.

I also didn't know that when I moved to the city, I'd become a shut-in. That I'd only take the T by myself once in two months. That I would walk only one route, from Boylston to the Shaw's by the Prudential Center, because it was this route that I knew and trusted. I didn't know moving to the city that I would be afraid to leave the dorm after dark, even though the darkness began at 3 p.m.

I left Boston in a crash, winding up in a hospital, then back to New Hampshire. Since then Boston, or any place new, meant only chaos—people swarming on the streets, ambulances blaring, people inside those ambulances, people in the ambulances heading to places I didn't want to think about. Going anywhere new meant that things might go wrong again.

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It had been four years since I escaped Boston. I'd settled back into a rural New Hampshire town, Newmarket, with a downtown consisting of literally one road. The one road housed three Italian joints, two bars, and a handful of boutiques that sold knickknacks, though these shops never seemed to be open. By this point I was a graduate student at the same school I'd finished my undergraduate degree at, and at first, the familiarity of the place was comforting.

But it was disheartening, too, at times. I would feel stuck in time, walking on the same sidewalks I had in years prior. The buildings stayed the same, but the students around me kept getting younger. I could talk with ease about where I was headed after class. I knew every last hidden parking

spot on campus, even if there was only three of them. I could lead my fellow classmates through campus buildings with the ease of a backwards-walking tour guide. But my life felt like a CD skipping on one note of one particular song.

And it was true, in a way. By day I spent near 40 hours a week churning out latte for inpatient drive-thru patrons. Then I would come home, wash the soggy coffee ground smell off of me, and fall asleep on the twin sized mattress on the ground of my bedroom. The town seemed smaller and smaller and I started to itch to leave.

I was in my professor's office when she held up a flier on a standard size piece of paper advertising a two week long trip to London. The trip would be a travel writing class, she explained. I have to admit that I didn't immediately jump at the idea. My natural tendency is to first think of all the things that might go wrong, then work backwards from there into what might actually be rewarding or fun. I would need to exchange my currency, need to request two weeks off of work, need to buy a suitcase, need to scrounge for rent the week after I came back...I would need to face my fear of the unknown.

“That could be fun,” I said. I took a flier and slid it into a folder in my backpack.

I didn't let myself actually read about the details of the trip until I was in the comforts of my own room later that night. Then, when I visited my parents for dinner, I brought the trip up casually. My mom had made one of her many stew concoctions—I think she has one stew for every day of the week—and the conversation had stalled to silence.

“London!” my dad said, perking up over his plate of monochromatic meat. He went on to tell me about the time he saw Stonehenge, how it was so much smaller than he'd expected. “You know,” he said, “you never know when you'll get a chance like this again.”

“I'm just really busy,” I said. I wished I hadn't brought it up. I stirred the stew. I eventually decided to go to London, but I avoided talking about it until the very last moment. When my parents dropped me off at Logan airport in Boston, I could've sworn there was a colony of bugs burrowing

under my skin. I wasn't afraid of plane crashes, or terrorist groups, or the people I would room with for the next two weeks. I couldn't really say at that point what, exactly, made me want to tear my hair out. My brother must have sensed it. He led me quietly through the terminal and only waved as I made my way through security.

I thought of when I'd left for Boston, how I tried to make the best of it. I was sure my life would get better, that I would stop smoking every night, stop dreaming about the train tracks, have no more dangerous encounters with alcohol, other students yelling, "Put her on her side!" while trying to help hide me from the RA.

I had posted on Facebook to anyone who would listen about heading off to Emerson, and even when I was only leaving my dorm to go to work a few days a week at one of the school's convenience stores, I posted about how much I loved Emerson and my new job. The pressure to seem happy overpowered any feeling I had to admit that I was sick, that I was slicing up my skin just to feel grounded in something, that I had never been more captive in my life.

The day before I left for London, I stayed with my boyfriend. I woke up at 6 in the morning and started pacing the room.

"I'm so nervous," I said when he slipped open his eyes and likely wondered what the hell I was doing.

"Why?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be excited?" I shook my head no.

One of the questions we'd been talking about in the online portion of my class was, "Why do people travel?" It was a question that had haunted me since the moment I enrolled to go on the trip. The last time I'd done something just because it was expected of me, I'd taken to Emerson and the city, trying to prove to myself and everyone around me that I was worthy of a so-called prestigious college despite my failing high school math grades.

Why did I truly want to go to London? Was it just so I could tell people I did it? So I could seem cultured and think I was better than anyone else who hadn't? I tried to lay beside my boyfriend in bed

and relax, but felt like I was a centipede with a million different moving parts. I knew deep down the main reason I was going to London wasn't because I had some burning need to see where Kate Middleton lived. It wasn't to see the Oxford University; it wasn't to see Buckingham Palace. It wasn't even to say I'd left the country. It was to prove to myself that I was better now, that I could handle a challenge somewhere new with nobody there to support me if I slipped up.

“So, when does your flight leave?” my dad asked me on the phone one night before my trip.

“I don't know,” I said. I hadn't even checked to remind myself since the ticket had been booked.

“Can we not talk about this right now?” I asked, suddenly defensive.

“Well, I just thought, since it *is* tomorrow...” he said. My dad had bought me a small blue suitcase for my trip. He taken some cash to the bank and converted it over for me. He'd bought me an adapter plug to use in the different-sized outlets for Christmas as well. I unwrapped all of my presents that night and tried to swallow my fear and show how grateful I was all at once, but it was pretty clear at that point that he was more excited for the trip than I was.

Even four years after I left Boston, four years after I was hospitalized, I saw a psychiatrist in Portsmouth every few months. The foyer leading up to the office smelled faintly like cigarette smoke, and it was unmarked and by a cigar shop, so I always felt like I was headed to some top secret headquarters, or at least this was sometimes a more comforting thing to pretend.

“Are you sure you're healthy enough to away for two weeks?” the doctor asked once I was in her office.

“Yeah,” I said, both offended and challenged to succeed at once. Bipolar disorder seems to be a cruel, never ending spiral: You enjoy just enough time with stability before the carpet is pulled out from under you gain. When depression slips back in, I can never be sure if I'll catch things on time—if I'll be set back for six months or pick up where I left off in a matter of weeks or days. The doctor wrote something down in her yellow file. I always wanted to take it and read what she was writing. Maybe she was writing a shopping list, for all I knew.

“I think you'll have an amazing time. I'm jealous,” she said, before shutting the file. I took that as my all-clear, but I wasn't so sure.

I had been switched to a new medicine for the first time in years recently, and things didn't always go smoothly. I had small, rough cuts on my stomach to show for it—a bad coping mechanism I thought I'd parted with four years ago, even more shameful the second time around. And in the past few weeks I'd been breaking down at work. I would start crying while counting the \$20 bills in the safe at the beginning of my shift. I would cry when I saw a car stopped on a high bridge with its hazards on, afraid I knew what it meant. I cried when another store supervisor told me I'd left a pitcher of ice tea out on the counter one night. My friends from class stopped by to visit and asked what was wrong, and there was no way I could provide an answer that made much sense, at least one that could be explained under the length of a six-page essay.

All the while, London loomed nearer. The spiraling fear grew bigger. I didn't tell anyone except for my boyfriend and my parents where I was going at first, save my brother, sister, and one close friend to a few days before Christmas.

But the day came and went, and we landed safely.

“Safe in London,” I wrote online.

“You're in London?” people wrote back. This time, I told myself, there would be no falsehoods.

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London turned out to be a breath of fresh air. No work, no social commitments, no rush from the holidays, just a steady stream of outings and coursework that was rhythmic and made sense. The rooms we stayed in housed six other people. At first, the thin blue mattresses on the hostel bunkbeds put a shock through my system. They looked familiar to the ones from the hospital beds I'd stayed in after my departure from Boston. But I quickly reminded myself of the differences.

It was becoming clearer that I only had one real goal coming into London: I wanted to go somewhere by myself. Compared to some others, who had itineraries pages long and maps circled and

ready to go, this was a meager and pathetic goal. But going out in the rain some morning to a coffee shop or the grocery store would mean I did more in two weeks than I had the entire time I was in Boston. And small goals like this was really how I had survived, getting through weeks and months in little chunks of hours and minutes, sometimes assigning myself tasks like, “Now brush your teeth.”

At first, getting oriented in London was a bit confusing. I had to train myself to look the opposite direction as black taxi cabs came down the streets, and make sure I minded that an American dollar is worth a lot less than a British pound. But soon enough I was riding the Tube with my classmates, making mental notes of where the Sainsbury's grocery store was, or the H&M by the Harrod's department store. Bit by bit, a little map formed in my head. It seemed to build in a spot of my brain that had been missing in Boston, a spot that was just black rotted mush. There had been no room back then, in that mode of survival, to take in my surroundings, no desire to go anywhere at all.

But the days I spent in London were jammed full of activity—museums, walking tours, bus excursions, wine bars that were almost like wine vending machines. One day, my class traveled together on a trip to Cambridge and arrived back on the Tube. By then, I knew the different stops on the line known as the Piccadilly Line. I moved my way in the crowded train into a seat and watched for the Gloucester Road stop. I was slumped in that subway-like trance when I realized the rest of my classmates had gotten off one stop before me.

For a moment, I panicked. I pictured the train going off into oblivion and getting covered in King Rats. But I took a minute to slow down. I knew exactly where I was. I got off one stop later, took the elevator, and walked to the hostel. Along the way I started to second guess myself, the way I had when the crying spells had started again before arriving in London. Was there a Radisson Hotel before the hostel? Was I confusing it with something else? I tried to trust myself. I was only walking in a straight line, after all. It was always possible to turn around.

But it turns out—as it does so much more often than we think—that my instincts were correct. There was the hostel, a block away. In the room, I was alone for one of the first times the entire trip. I

had, days earlier, satisfied my one and only goal: I had walked to a convenience store blocks away and bought some hand lotion that I'd forgotten to pack. Then I stopped at a Cafe Nero and ordered a double espresso. But in the silence of the room, flopped across my top bunk, I realized I'd finally stopped worrying about whether or not I would be okay in London, whether or not the city would eat me whole.

I knew that when I returned to the States, people would ask me if I'd tried fish and chips and if I'd seen those guards in the funny hats. They'd ask where I stayed and would want me to upload pictures onto Facebook. My parents, my acquaintances—they would want to know what little tidbits of history and culture I'd picked up along the way. And I knew I would oblige them; I would scroll through my photos and tell my brother I'd seen the rooftop where The Beatles last played live. I would tell them about the different ciders I'd tried, how I'd been to the pub where Amy Winehouse got her start, how I'd haggled in an open-air market. But I knew nobody would ask me if I'd reclaimed the city, if I'd reclaimed the unknown. Nobody would ask what it was like to take back even a small part of the time and the confidence that I had lost at 18. But I would know, and I would always remember.