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Finding home: A collection of travel essays from a semester in Florence

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Finding Home: A Collection of
Travel Essays from a Semester in Florence, Italy

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by Kathleen Sheild Melville

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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1. Lost in a Foreign City

I looked at the street ahead of me and marveled at how different the scene was from back home. The cobblestone streets stretched to meet ancient walls, cracking with age. The history in Italy is apparent in the ways the windows are still sheltered by wooden shutters that barely keep heat in and the doors ache when pushed open. Modern inventions almost look silly in contrast to the historic architecture of the buildings, but they too are worthy of interest to a foreigner. Tiny two-door Fiats line the streets, crammed inches away from each other into unmarked parking spots. I marveled at the seemingly endless line of Vespas; eighty-or-so vehicles packed tight to fit a single block. I thought of the students back home at JMU always complaining about the lack of parking on campus, smiling as I imagined them attempting to squeeze their cars into a spot the width of a recliner.

A few girls from the study abroad program and I were on our way back from a club opening. We were raving about the night we had had and how our classmates would be envious that they hadn't come out too, despite it being a Wednesday night.

"They're going to be *so* jealous," we said, giggling.

"I don't care if I'm exhausted in class and if I look like I just rolled out of bed, I've got a story to tell and that's all that matters," I said.

We discussed our peers and their unfortunate choice to miss a great night, and continued to walk the streets of Florence to where we thought our homestays were.

Pretty soon, though, we realized we didn't recognize our surroundings.

"I know I've seen this street name," a girl named Mel said, "but I can't remember when I saw it. Was it on my way to class or during the walking tour we took yesterday?"

We looked around for signs of anything familiar.

“I think I recognize this street,” someone would say. We would turn down the road and continue until that leader lost faith in her decision. Next, someone else would make a supposition, only to be followed by regret a block or two later. We had only been in Florence a few days. This meandering continued for about an hour.

It was now two in the morning, and we were lost in a foreign city. The gravity of the situation started to hit. What if we couldn't find our way? We were a group of young women in an unfamiliar city, wandering the streets at night. Our parents and movies had all warned us against this type of situation, and yet here we were.

“No one brought a map with her?” I asked.

Everyone shook their heads. Unwilling to admit the danger we were in, we continued to guess our direction, hoping we might eventually run into a landmark or the Arno River, from where we would be able to find our way. Florence is set up in a grid, so we had to find our way eventually, right?

As we continued down dark and unfamiliar roads, I noticed Mary was limping.

“What's wrong?” I said.

“My shoes are giving me blisters,” she said.

It was then that I noticed the blood seeping through the heel of her flats. Our situation had grown progressively worse.

“We should have never gone out,” Mel said. “We don't have the lay of the city yet. What were we thinking?”

“I knew this wasn't a good idea,” Mary said.

I was losing faith in myself, and the strangers I was wandering Florence with. I could feel the hot tears creeping up my cheeks toward their ducts when Mary noticed a light beaming from an open store window.

“Do you think that’s the secret bakery?” she said.

“It’s two a.m., Mary, I doubt it. Let’s just find our way home.” I said.

Mary was convinced. She walked up to the door and saw two men working in a kitchen inside. They were baking, but we had no way of knowing if they were a secret bakery or not. Mary knocked on the glass. We stood in awe as one of the men held up a finger to indicate he would answer her in a minute.

Could it be true? Had we actually found a *secret bakery*? We had heard the rumors from past study abroad students. They had mentioned late-night bakers who would sell their fresh-made treats to those lucky enough to find them, but we couldn’t believe we had actually stumbled upon one. On our first night out, no less.

We giggled wildly before nervously hushing each other. Rumor had it that they were called *secret bakeries* because it was illegal for the bakers to do this. They are preparing deliveries for the next morning, and their superiors don’t know that they sell to students at night and pocket the profits. If we were too loud, we would draw attention to the transaction and risk being found out.

The baker approached the door, “Si?” he said.

Mary was the boldest, “We want secret pastries.”

He just stared at her. My stomach dropped. This poor man; he was just trying to get through a late-night shift at a bakery, and he’s bothered by drunk American students who can’t even speak to him in his own language.

“Never mind,” I say, turning away, signaling to my friends to do the same.

Just as we all started to walk away, the man answers, “Quanta?”

Mary held up her open hand and said, “Cinque” for the five of us.

The man turned around and walked back inside the kitchen. My mouth dropped. We gawked at each other, failing to contain our excitement.

“Oh my god, oh my god” Mel said. “We actually found one, we found a secret bakery.”

We laughed and quickly hushed ourselves again when we saw the man return with a white paper bag.

“Cinque euro” he said. We each handed Mary a euro and she gave the coins to the man. He smiled and handed us the bag, placing a finger up to his lips. “Shhh.”

We turned and ran halfway down the block before stopping to revel in our victory. Laughing, we opened the bag and looked inside. The scent of the fresh pastries enveloped our nostrils and overwhelmed our drunken euphoria. Inside were five croissants, warm from the oven, dusted with powdered sugar.

I grabbed one and immediately took a bite. The buttery pastry melted on my tongue and I could taste something chocolate gushing through.

“Guys, they’re filled with chocolate custard,” I said.

Everyone gobbled up their pastries greedily, emitting joyful moans as they tasted the fresh treats. Late-night food in America usually consists of stale Doritos or a reheated bowl of Chinese food. Instead, here we were in Florence, munching on fresh pastries that had been handed to us from a baker who had made them by hand. Wow, is Italy amazing.

As I finished my croissant (or cornetto as it's called in Italian), I looked toward the end of the street. I saw the side of a church, of which the buttressed arches seemed familiar. I sped toward the building.

"Kalli, what are you doing?" Mel called after me, still chewing.

I kept running until I reached the end of the road and looked to my right, where I saw the Santa Croce square.

"Guys, I know where we are," I shouted to them. They ran toward me excitedly. I was right; the arches I had seen were on the side of the Santa Croce church. Not only was it an extremely recognizable landmark in Florence, but Santa Croce also happened to be right across from the apartment I was living in for my homestay. We had found our way!

We crossed the square excitedly, laughing about the powdered sugar that now covered our clothes.

"Tonight was so worth it," Mel said.

We were back to gossiping about how jealous our classmates would be and how glad we were that we had decided to go out. Giggling the whole way home, I realized I had not only survived my first night out, but made connections along the way. It's crazy how one right turn and a chocolate pastry can turn a night around.

2. Piazza Michelangelo

It feels like thousands of stairs extending up to nothing. The walls of the pathway are twisted with ivy, stones tangled up with snarling arms of the plant. As the stairs continue, it seems to grow darker, though with no apparent reason as to why. The air is cool and damp. A black cat scurries across the path and disappears to nowhere.

Step after step, completion seems impossible. A continually extending final stair measures to infinity, never to be reached. And then suddenly, you are there. Looking back at the mountain of steps, the trip is forgotten and only the altitude is felt.

The view at the top is disappointing. An ice cream cart. A small hotel. A parking lot. Nothing worth the climb, it seems. To your left, you hear music. You follow the melody, noticing that the parking lot extends behind a tiny diner. Circling around the diner, you notice a souvenir cart littered with Venetian Gondolas and leaning towers even though we are in Florence. Then, you see a statue of the David.

You continue walking and spot another cart and then another. Soon, you notice the source of the music: a man is singing while playing the guitar, an empty case open in front of him. The song is familiar, American. The words are accented but the melody is home.

After passing the singer, you see it. You see the reason for the steps. You see the view.

Where to look? All of Florence extends in front of you, beside you, and behind you. To the right, you see the Duomo, Florence's cathedral. Over the tops of the tiny buildings, you continue to scan, eyes finally landing upon the Ponte Vecchio. You crossed that bridge ten minutes ago. *How is the world so small?*

As you continue to scan to your left, you see the edge of the city. Signaled by a wall and extending for miles along the perimeter of Florence, you see the exit and entrance gates. Beyond the wall is farmland and vineyards, a blunt contrast from the metropolis just inside. You look back over Piazza Michelangelo, unsure of where to set your gaze. You didn't know Florence extended this far. Infinitely.

For a while you just stand, looking. Absorbing every detail of the city you knew so well before, and now see for the first time. Finally, when you are either filled or overwhelmed, you turn back. You reach the top of the stairs again and begin the journey back, breathless.

3. Wine and Italian Culture

It's eight-thirty and we're waiting for the rest of the group to arrive. A cool March breeze whips through the square and wraps around our bare legs, teasing us for wearing cotton miniskirts on such a cold night. We huddle closer, tucking our bodies tightly together on the stone bench facing Piazza Santa Croce.

We watch as herds of Florentine teenagers and young adults cluster on the concrete steps of the Santa Croce cathedral. Like us, they are laughing and gossiping as they sip bottles of cheap wine under the moonlight. Unlike us, they split each bottle between three and four friends.

Holding my own bottle of Pinot Noir, I start to feel a warmth encroaching on my cheeks. In Florence, American tourists have a reputation for being disruptive drunks, stumbling through the historic streets of the city at all hours of the day.

"They don't appreciate good wine," my host mother would complain. "If it's a nice bottle, two sips are all you need. Just two sips." True to her belief, Elizabetta would pour the faintest sliver of wine into our glasses, on the rare nights she would even serve alcohol with our meal. While I heard stories from classmates of drunken dinners with their host families, where a new wine was served with each of their courses, my host mother rarely served alcohol with the meal. She found it unnecessary, she said. But when

she did drink, she explained, she only drank the best. In my barely-filled dinner glass, I would taste two sips at a time of Barolo, Barbaresco, Chianti: red wines cultivated from the best grapes in all of Italy, some would even claim the entire world. She would explain to us how the warmth of the southern regions wasn't suited to produce the hearty grapes necessary for such rich, full-bodied wines.

Some of the information Elizabetta shared my roommate and I were already familiar with because of the wine class we took as part of our coursework in Florence. Twice a week, we attended an hour and a half lecture on Wine and Italian culture.

Each class, we spent one hour learning the specifics of vineyard-growing techniques, grape production via regions produced, and the climate characteristics assisting those productions. The last half hour of every class was the tasting portion, where we would assemble dozens of wine glasses amid our notebooks and taste two or three wines or spumante (sparkling wines).

Our professor, Diletta Frescobaldi, had inherited to her family's historic vineyard franchise. Hers was one of the original elite families in Florence. They are so well known that there is a Piazza Frescobaldi in the heart of the city, which we would pass on the way to our Italian classes. Because of her connections, we were sometimes able to taste vintages and supertuscan wines costing between forty and a hundred euro a bottle.

Can you imagine? In Virginia, I would have been

satisfied buying whatever flavor of Barefoot wine I could find on sale. And now here I was, tasting samples of Italy's finest wines handed to me by the woman whose family had produced them.

In Italy, this is just the way wine is infused into everyday life. Knowing an owner of a vineyard or a member of a historically noble family is just a part of living in Florence. Wine is one of Italy's largest and most impressive exports, woven into the economy in an indispensable way. How can something so essential to Italy's impact on the world not have an effect on the people who live there? If Virginia were known for producing the world's most impressive *anything*, would we not take the same care to preserve that reputation? Would we not treat that commodity with respect, savoring and appreciating every taste as opposed to consuming it mindlessly for the simple purpose of a buzz?

Sitting on the stone bench that March night, I lifted the bottle of wine to my lips and drank as an Italian man walked by. Not much older than us, he looked at our group in awe, pointing as he said, "Uno. Due. Tre. Quattro. Cinque. Five bottles of wine for five girls." With that and a smirk, he left.

By pointing out our overindulgence, he had made clear the ingratitude we were expressing for our incredible opportunity. We had been given the chance to immerse ourselves in Italian culture and yet we were wasting the moment on an American instinct to get drunk for cheap. We had failed Italy for a buzz. I cannot think of a moment in my life more sobering than that.

4. Morocco

Night 1: The Darkness

Passing regal hotels that lie adjacent to dusty benches crowded with street beggars, the cab navigates the streets of Marrakesh easily. The city is dark and unfamiliar so my friends and I are thankful we had arranged for the hostel to transport us from the airport. The driver turns onto a dark street, swerving in and out of jaywalking pedestrians. The buildings are small, only two or three stories high, and I take note of how the capital of Morocco is less industrialized than any city I had been to before. We drive past about six dozen wooden carts, boarded up for the night, and the driver explains how these are the *souks* that will be bustling with activity tomorrow.

In the small amount of research we did before our trip to Marrakesh, we learned about the Moroccan souks where precious hand-made African products are sold. “Haggling is a sport in Africa. Getting a decent deal will take strategy and skill” my brother warned me in an email prior to my trip. He had studied abroad in Senegal in his college years and his advice on navigating an African city was all I had to help me through my first experience on the continent.

We gape at the expanse of carts, unable to imagine the chaos they would be the next morning when displaying various colorful goods sold by equally colorful vendors. The driver turns the corner from the marketplace and stops on a dark, eerie street with no hostel in sight.

He points to a shadow of a figure standing in an unlit alleyway and says, “He will take you the rest of the way.”

My stomach drops. “Why aren’t you taking us?” I say.

“My car won’t fit through the small streets. It’s okay” he says, motioning in the man’s direction.

I am travelling with Mel and Sarah and we all stare at each other, conversing with our eyes. *Are we really going to follow this stranger down that alley? We don't even know for sure where he's taking us.* We come to the decision to follow him based on the frightening judgment that we have no other choice.

Our guide does not speak English, so he seizes Mel's suitcase and gestures that we follow him down the alleyway. We have no option but to concede.

We pass a group of men who stare menacingly at us. I realize I haven't seen any women walking the streets since we had left the airport. Could it be that women are unsafe at night? I glance over at Mel and she is staring back at me, eyes wide with terror. Looking back down at my feet, I follow more closely behind our stranger guide. We turn another corner and continue down another alley, empty of life and movement. This pattern continues.

As we travel deeper and deeper into the winding corridors of the city, I can't help think that something is wrong. *This is a major city in Morocco, where are all the stores? Where is everyone?* The farther we follow him, the more the fear swells within me. We have taken such an indistinguishable path that if he were to turn on us, there is no way we could find our way back.

We zigzag through a tiny passageway and then duck under a wooden slab. *This can't be the way to our hostel. The website had said it was an easy five-minute walk from the souks.* We had been walking for over ten minutes now.

I stop, making the halt in my footsteps audible. The guide turns around.

"Ees okay," he says, and motions for us to follow.

"Where are you taking us?" I say, feigning confidence.

"Ees okay" he repeats, and continues into the darkness.

I am more terrified than ever now. A stray cat hisses as we pass it. I can no longer look at either of my friends because the fear is too tangible. Looking at them will only confirm what I already know to be true: wherever we are going, it isn't our hostel.

A man comes out of the darkness of a side alley and makes no effort to mask his gaze on us. I stare straight ahead, ignoring him. My breath is measured. *How did we get ourselves into this?*

We duck under yet another panel and the man stops in front of a massive wooden door, indicating that we are at our destination. There is no logo saying Equity Point, the name of our hostel. There isn't a neon sign saying "Open." There aren't even windows or fountains or any sort of indication that the building we are standing in front of is a business at all. He knocks three times on the door.

As the handle on the other side of the giant door creaks slowly at his secret knock, I am anticipating what dangers might lay beyond it. I saw the movie *Taken*; I can imagine the drug-induced brothel of kidnapped American women we are about to enter. My family joked with me about getting kidnapped into sex slavery before I left the U.S., and I had joked along, but here I am about to enter just that. Maybe something worse.

I brace myself, ready to sprint back into the darkness of wherever we came from, praying someone might take mercy on us and save us from our handler.

The door opens far enough so that I can see beyond it. Inside the brightly lit lobby, my eyes first catch sight of a college-aged woman typing on her MacBook computer in a cushioned loveseat. The floors, walls, and ceiling are covered in brightly colored tiles, and there is a tiny fountain spewing water in the center of the lobby. The room is lively with color, full of patterns and typical Moroccan designs covering every inch. We take a step in and to our left see a smiling

receptionist behind a beautifully tiled counter topped with a metal plate, engraved with “Equity Point Hostel.”

Fighting back tears, I look at my friends. We share relieved smiles, exchanging sentiments wordlessly. Fumbling for some currency, I tip our guide in shame at how wrong I had been about his intentions. He nods a thank you, hands Mel her suitcase, and exits the hostel, reentering the darkness we came from.

Day 2: Lost in Marrakesh

I wake up on my top bunk in the hostel room and blink at the ceiling, still shocked by the events of the previous night. Last night I had thought I was in the most danger I could ever be in my life. I was so sure of my ominous fate and had no emergency number to call, no awareness of the city I was in, and no plan of escape. With every ignorant choice I had made, I was at the mercy of a man whom I didn’t know, without a trace of evidence linking me to him. Yet, here I am today, safe in my hostel bed.

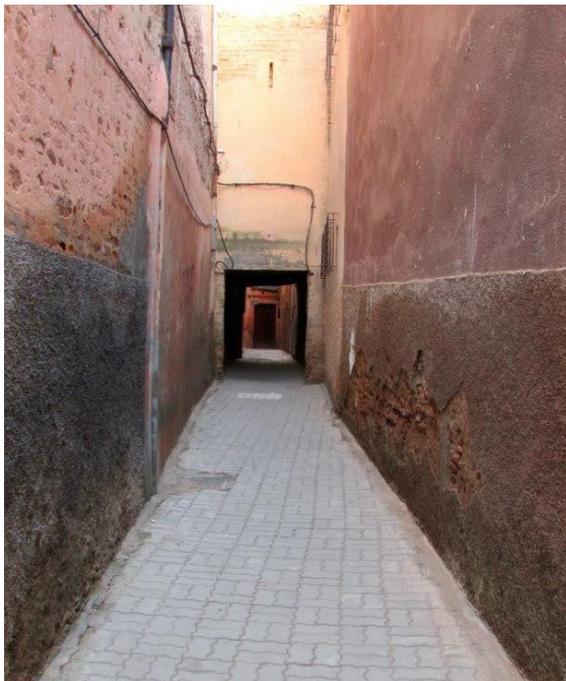
Clamoring around the room, my roommates and I prepare for our first morning in Marrakesh. I commit a major mistake, rinsing my toothbrush off in the sink’s tap water. We were warned by the hostel’s receptionist that Moroccan tap water is unsafe to consume, and purchased water bottles for just this purpose. My day is already off to a rough start.

Despite this unfortunate accident, I am looking forward to the day. When we leave our room,



we marvel at the beauty of our traditional Moroccan hostel in the daytime. The rooms of the hostel surround an open courtyard with a small tile pool in the center. Buildings in Morocco are typically built like this, open to the elements and boasting traditional designs like pointed archways, tiled floors, and colorful hanging lamps.

We grab a map of the city and exit the hostel, ready to embark on our day of shopping at the souks. Following our map, we head out into the streets, travelling down alleyways that look friendlier than they did last night. The streets that had possessed such danger yesterday are now full of exciting promise and mystery.



The empty corridors give way to bustling shopping streets, now bursting with pottery, jewelry, and handmade leather and metal goods. Vendors call out in English, recognizing us as tourists immediately.

“Honey, discount for you. Only for you, because you are so beautiful.”

Trained by our encounters with cat-calling Italians, we stare ahead and pass them quickly, feigning confidence in our route. We pass dozens of vendors, turning corners only to find more colorful pop-up shops bursting with vibrant displays. The products surrounding us are tempting, but we’re on a mission to find the famous Marrakesh Medina marketplace in the older part of the city. This is where our guidebooks and research told us we would find our largest selection of handmade Moroccan goods. After quite a

bit of searching and retracing our paths, we find the famous Medina. The tiny corridor we had been walking in opens up to a massive square, bustling with life.

Hundreds of fruit stands, restaurants, jewelry vendors, and street performers cover every inch of sight.

“The sweetest oranges for the sweetest ladies,” a vendor calls to us as we walk by.

A jersey salesman offers a free football jersey. “A special deal for a special woman.”

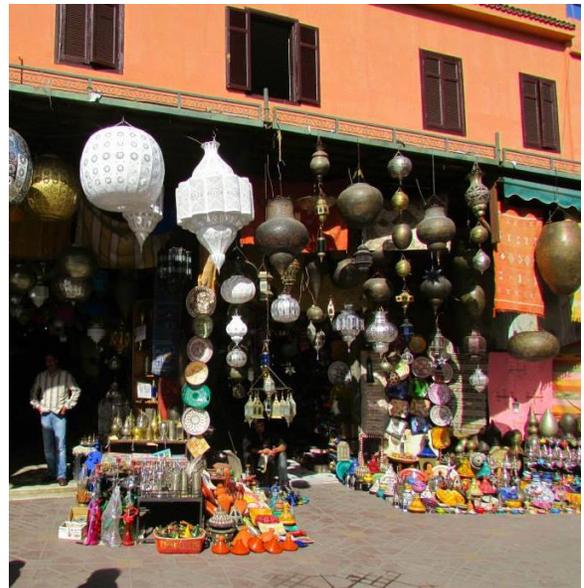
We pass him by, familiar with the ploy to get our attention from the Italian leather markets in Florence. We don’t fall for it and continue forward, proud of how we are handling our first Moroccan experience.

“Do you have a student discount?” We learn haggling strategy quickly and spend the day acquiring souvenirs.

We giggle about our successful shopping trip as we head back to our hostel around lunchtime. The streets are poorly labeled and, when combined with the jagged roadways, it can be nearly impossible to find your way.

“I remember this street,” Sarah says. We follow her down an alley of vendors and casually glance at the stands as we pass. We continue farther, following Sarah as she takes turn after turn. Once she reaches an unfamiliar street, she swivels around.

“Actually, I think I turned left back somewhere when I should’ve turned right.”



We shrug and turn back, unconcerned by the detour because we are still surrounded by life and the excitement of the city. The noises, crowds of people, glimmering silvers, and bright patterns are magnificent.

After about twenty minutes in which we turn back and try other paths, Sarah's confidence wanes.

"I guess I was wrong. Should we look at the map?"

We stare at the map for a while and decide to return to the Medina. We follow the street we are on until it opens up to a corner of vendors that we recognize. *Okay, good.*

"I think the Medina is this way," Mel says.

"I'm pretty sure it's this way," I say.

After some deliberation, we decide to try Mel's way first, this time trying to be more aware of the path we are taking. Mel guides us through a few turns until we come upon a quieter street.

"Okay, I definitely don't remember this. Let's go back," Sarah says.

Mel agrees, and it takes us twenty minutes to retrace our path to the original corner, because we take some wrong turns on the way.

Because the streets aren't formed into squared blocks, they can be difficult to follow. Where the map indicates a straight road will be, we come upon a curved road with an opening to two alleys unlisted on the map. And when the streets aren't labelled with street signs like they would be in the U.S., it becomes nearly impossible to find where you are.

We have now been walking for two hours since we left the Medina. We are on the same corner of vendors when panic starts to seep in.

“We’ve tried every direction,” I say. “Now I can’t tell if things look familiar because we’ve we passed them earlier today or just because we passed it on a wrong turn.”

The only option we have is to ask a local where our hostel is.

“Equity Point?” we ask.

Vendors shake their heads negatively.

“Equity Point? It’s a hostel.”

No luck.

“Why didn’t we ask address of the hostel before we left?”

I cannot believe no one knows our hostel. We continue to wander down paths, hoping for a correct turn. It’s now four o’clock and we have been walking for three hours. Sunset will be in two hours. *What if we don’t find the hostel in time?*

Less enamored with our surroundings, the noises and colors start to seem intimidating. The crowded alleyways feel small and claustrophobic. We bump into shoulders while scanning for street signs and receive glares from locals. Men on the street start to recognize us retracing our steps and taunt us, asking if we are lost. We are lost.

For the second time that weekend, my body is tense with fear. I can’t believe we just left the hostel, assuming we would be able to find it again. Again, we give each other glances communicating wordlessly the hopelessness we feel. We have tried everything: the hostel map, locals, our intuition. We have again ended up in a situation without a backup plan. We have no options left.

We continue to retrace our steps, growing less confident with every turn. We are no longer talking, only whispering hesitant directions to each other every so often. Another half hour passes by.

I am tense and worried. *What are we going to do?*

We turn a corner. Mel brightens up and says, “Look.”

Following the direction of her gaze, I notice the familiar street. When exiting the hostel, we had taken three turns before coming out of that alley. It was recognizable because the vendors just in front of it were the very first vendors we had seen this morning.

Energized with hope, we head under an archway into the street. We make the turns back easily, returning to the hostel at five o’clock. Our first mission upon arrival is to have the receptionist mark on our map the easiest paths to and from the building. We then decide not to leave the hostel until the next morning, having had enough excitement for one day.

Day 3: A Relaxing Ride



The camel rides are a blast. I had been warned that camels were unfriendly animals that spit a lot, but we encounter

The next morning, we arrange through the hostel for camel rides in the desert. A major selling point for the event: a guide will pick us up at the hostel, bring us to the location, wait while we ride, and then bring us back. After yesterday, we aren’t interested in trying it on our own again.



no such thing. Though we shame ourselves for being such tourists, it really is an amazing experience. And when we are met by our guide afterwards, it is the most incredible relief.

After the camel rides, we return to the hostel and start to pack our things. Ahead of us will be the most frightening experience of the entire trip: our journey home.

The entire weekend is a bargain. The hostel costs the equivalent of fifteen dollars a night and the air travel is only ninety dollars. The catch on the flights, however, is that we will be leaving Morocco from Fez, a seven-hour train ride away.

Night 3: Going Home

After haggling a taxi ride to the train station, we sit in a corner with our heaping pile of luggage. The only train that is running from Marrakesh to Fez will arrive at six in the evening. Calculating the distance, we come to terms with the fact that we will ride an overnight train to a city we don't know, because we have no choice. For an hour we sit, unable to discuss the daunting night that lies ahead of us.

At six o'clock, we wait on the platform as the train pulls in. Before the train stops, people rush past us and pile onto the train, reaching out to pull each other on as it continues to move.

"Is it not going to stop?" We shout at each other, panicked.

We start walking with the train, grabbing people in the crowd around us, asking if we have the correct train. Once confirmed that "Yes, this will stop in Fez," we climb on to the moving train.

Inside, we are met with a chaos of people running through the cars, yelling as they go. We rush with them, boggled and slightly frightened by the pandemonium. We walk through three cars before finding a section with four empty seats. Piling our luggage onto the last seat, we

sit, still uneasy as young people run past us shouting at one another. Mel sees a young woman sitting across from us and walks over to her.

“Are all trains in Morocco this chaotic?” I hear her ask.

She and the woman talk for a little bit and then Mel returns.

“There was a school field trip today,” she explains. “They’re running because it’s two hundred students and they’re trying to find seats together.”

I throw my hands up.

Of course, we get the train with two hundred rowdy high school kids. I am relieved, though, to find out that this is not typical of Moroccan trains, considering we have seven hours to go.

After two hours of chaos, the group of students finally reaches their stop. I begin to notice that the conductor is not announcing the stops as we reach them; everyone just seems to know where they are. I mention this to Sarah and Mel and it makes us all uneasy. If we don’t get off the train at the right stop, we have no option. We will be stuck in a foreign city in Morocco with no way home.

For the next five hours, we watch the stops go by. Some are clearly labelled by which city they are while others are unmarked. Growing more anxious with each hour, our fear is compounded by the knowledge that even if we do get off at the right stop, it will still be Fez at three in the morning. Every option before us is grim.

It is one in the morning and the overwhelming sense of disaster is starting to take its toll. Our eyes are straining to stay open as well as straining to remain dry, despite the predicament we are in. We might miss our stop in Fez. Even if we get off at the right stop, we have no plan from

there. *Will we have to stay in the train station? What if it closes at a certain time? Where will we go?* We sit silently, staring at one another. Once again, we have found ourselves in such a precarious situation that to vocalize it is too frightening.

My eyes start to swell. Mel sees what is happening and attempts to calm me down.

“We’ll figure it out. We’ll be okay.”

“How did this happen? How are we in this situation?” I say.

“We can’t talk about it. Just know that tomorrow; we will be on our plane back to Florence,” she says. “We’re going to be okay.”

I can tell she isn’t certain, but tears are as bad as stating the situation, so I force them back down. We stare in silence for another hour and a half.

As I had been doing for the past two hours, I ask friendly-looking strangers “how soon until Fez?” Finally, a woman tells me it’s the next stop.

We gather all of our luggage and wait by the exit doors. As more people collect around the exits, I confirm with them too. *We’re almost to Fez.*

As a major city in Morocco, Fez is one of the stops clearly labelled along the route. We hop off, relieved to have reached the next stage in our travels. Taking a look around the train station, we decide that staying there is doable, but not a great option. The openness of the station has caused the night air to flow in, decreasing the temperature too much for a comfortable overnight stay. We walk outside and survey the cab situation.

We see ten people outside the station, standing and waiting to greet us. Two of them step forward and say something in French.

“Does anyone speak English?” I ask.

One of the men answers charismatically, “What can I do for you ladies?”

“We need a cab to the airport,” I say. “And we only have fifty dirham.”

This is not haggling; it is the harsh truth we are facing. We have less than five dollars and are asking to get a twenty-minute taxi ride.

“That won’t do, but I can get someone to do it for a hundred,” the man says. He is the in-between person, whose job it is to haggle and then hand us off to a driver. He thinks we are in the primary negotiation stage; unfortunately, we are just desperate.

“Please,” we beg, “that is all we’ve got.”

He discusses with the men standing behind him, who are apparently the drivers, none of whom agree to take us. Our chances are looking grim.

“Do you have anything more?” he says.

We shake our heads, and give our best ‘take pity’ faces. He says something to one of the men behind him and they agree.

“Okay,” he says, “follow him.”

We follow the driver to the parking lot, relieved that we have a ride to the airport. The final leg of our night of travels is almost over. He walks us across the parking lot and knocks on the back door of a cab. There is a man sleeping inside. They exchange words and our guide walks away. We stare as the man in the back of the cab climbs out and gets into the front seat, motioning for us to get in.

It is an odd situation, but the man with whom we had haggled had seemed trustworthy, so we climb in the back of the cab.

The car shakes when the driver starts the ignition. The engine is sputtering loudly as he inches it forward and out of the parking lot. *No way this car doesn’t break down before we get there.* We are going one, two miles an hour, creeping through the empty streets of downtown

Fez. Slowly, the car gains momentum as the engine sputters louder and louder. It somehow manages to get to a workable speed and we are on our way to the airport.

I look out the windows at the dark streets of downtown Fez. The city is more industrial than Marrakesh, with tall buildings and concrete roads, as opposed to the flat dirt pathways of Marrakesh. There are few people walking around, but that makes sense considering it is three in the morning. After about ten minutes, the buildings give way to houses. Five more minutes and the houses give way to nothing. I shoot a sideways glance at Mel and Sarah as we move farther and farther from the lights of the city. *Don't panic, he's just taking you to the airport.*

There is nothing before us. All we can see is desert and darkness in every direction. *Is he taking us to the airport?* The car jolts and makes a popping noise, but the driver seems unmoved and continues.

I see a sign for the airport. *Phew.* It points left. *See, nothing to worry about.* He goes straight. My face is hot and I grip my hands into fists. *What is he doing?* I want to say something but I'm too scared. He speeds up. *Oh my God.* My eyes are saucers as I stare ahead at the dark road we are headed for. In my peripheral, I see Mel clench her fists.

Up ahead, there is a building to our right. It is the size of a house and there is one dim light on. I am strategizing an escape plan when the driver starts to slow down. We go from around seventy miles an hour to forty. Now thirty. Twenty. *What is he doing??* Ten. He starts pulling off to the curb.

My heart is pounding. *Is this it?* I can't believe what's happening. I can't look at Mel and Sarah. I can't think. *Please God, don't let this be it. Please.* Fists clenched, I am praying for my life. Ten. *Please God, not like this.* My body is frozen. He is almost to a complete stop. He curves farther to the side of the road. *Not like this.*

As the car creeps forward on the side of the road, it begins to speed up again slowly. Twenty. Twenty-five. He curves back onto the main road. Forty. Fifty. We pass the building and continue on. I see Mel's hands unclench slightly. Sixty. Another sign appears with an airplane on it. I am still frozen and praying, but my heart is no longer pounding. *What just happened?*

We stay silent in the back of the car. After a few minutes, he begins to slow again, curving to the side of the road. I am still frozen. My face grows hot again. He slows almost to a full stop at the curb before speeding up again. *Why does he keep doing that?* I look to my left and see something bumpy, darker than the rest of the road. *Speed bump?* We continue on.

I see another sign with an airplane on it, pointing left. He turns left. I see the lights of the airport. I let my shoulders relax, but I still can't look over at Sarah and Mel. A sign points right, he turns right. We cross the parking lot and he parks right at the curb. The minute the car comes to a full stop, I swing open the door and jump out, Mel following closely behind. The driver gets our bags from the trunk and hands them to us. I give him the money whispering "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

We run in the front doors of the airport, still wordless. Once inside, we drop our bags and look up at each other. The look in their eyes says everything about what that ride could have been. What this weekend could have been.

In three days, we have made so many choices that could have turned wrong. We have followed strangers down dark alleyways, been lost in the souks, ridden an overnight train, and taken a sketchy cab twenty minutes outside of the city. Yet here we are standing in the Fez airport, safe as could be. Falling into my two friends, we hold each other and finally let the tears fall, once again, wordlessly.

5. Paris

Day One

The “City of Love.” The “City of Lights.” Paris. It was the trip I had been waiting for since I had stepped on the plane at JFK International Airport on January 6th. Yes, I had been excited to spend the next three months living in a real Italian home, eating authentic Italian food, and learning about the rich history and culture Italy is known for. But on that flight across the Atlantic I was mostly thinking about was how I would now be that much closer to Paris.

When I was about five years old, my dad was offered a position in Provence, in the South of France. He took the job and we lived there for two years, of which I remember almost nothing. Luckily, a few years after we returned to the States, he was offered another position in France, this time in Paris. We spent three years living in Paris, calling one of the world’s most touristed cities our home. I was young then too, so some memories have faded, but what I do remember I have held onto since. Now, a month into my European adventure, I had the opportunity to sharpen those faded memories of my beloved city. I was beyond excited.

We arrived late on Thursday night, so we went straight to the hostel to get some sleep to better tackle the city the next day. Anxious about fitting everything in that I wanted to get to, I gave orders on wakeup times and said I would take care of the morning from there. Using a map provided by the hostel receptionist, I planned our route through central Paris, squeezing every last attraction in.

The next morning, we woke up and prepared for the day. The hostel room was buzzing with excitement, as some people were visiting Paris for the first time and others were raving about past trips on high school spring breaks or family vacations. I was excited as well, but also worried. *What if it wasn’t as great as I had remembered it to be? What if, after eleven years*

away, I had built up my city too much, so much that it could never compare? I was anxious to get started, so we left at eight thirty. That would give us plenty of time to reach the Eiffel Tower by the time it opened at nine-thirty.

After figuring out the metro with the help of a friendly English-speaking stranger and losing an iPhone on said metro to a not-so-friendly pickpocketing stranger, we finally arrived at the stop labelled “La Tour Eiffel.” Standing under the Eiffel Tower, it finally hit us that we were in *Paris, France*.



La Tour Eiffel

“I can’t believe I’m actually here,” Sarah said, “Paris!”

She captured the sentiments of the entire group. We were in one of the world’s most famous cities, standing under, arguably, its most iconic monument. Almost every person in the world hopes to go to Paris at some point in his or her life and stand under the Eiffel Tower, and here we were, doing just that.

Once we all gathered our emotions, we started the climb up the tower. We had planned for a grueling climb up hundreds of stairs, but we discovered that the stairs were only available up to the second level, so we rode the elevator the rest of the way.

“Hey, we tried,” KJ said, and we shrugged off the missed bragging opportunity.

At the top, we looked over the railing at the sprawling city before us. We gazed at the Parisian architecture stretching out onto Parisian streets as Parisian wind whipped hair across our eyes. It wasn't just an incredible view; it was an incredible view of Paris.



Paris, as seen from the Eiffel Tower

Standing on the Eiffel Tower, looking out onto the city, I felt a sense of familiarity wash over me. Specific memories had faded, like the first time I had ever climbed the Eiffel Tower, but the general sense of the city had remained. The architecture of the buildings, the cobblestone streets, even the crunch of the gravel felt familiar.

We rode the high of our Eiffel Tower experience and continued on our tour of central Paris, guided by my hostel map. In just a few hours, we visited the Arc de Triomphe, walked down the Champs-Élysées (a major fashion street in Paris), grabbed some ham and cheese crêpes at a sidewalk stand, walked through the Tuileries garden, passed by the Louvre, crossed the

lovelock bridge, toured the Notre Dame Cathedral, and had some café and pastries at a traditional French bakery. Mon Dieu!

Content with having squeezed all my required spots into our day, I dismissed my tour group for the afternoon. The group split, half looking to shop and the other half in search of a famous bookstore and the perhaps equally famous Croques Monsieur. Now, the more important part of that venture was the search for the Croques Monsieur, essentially a glorified ham and cheese sandwich. What makes Croques Monsieurs so special is the rich gruyere cheese inside and the creamy béchamel sauce that is poured over top of the sandwich. Sound decadent? Wait until you have had a Croques Madame, which is the same thing, only the Madame is topped with a fried egg. Tell me a gooey egg yolk on anything won't make it taste better.



La Croques Madame

Day Two

Our second day in Paris was less regimented, I had one group plan and one personal: Versailles with the group, followed by a trip to see my old house. After our tour of the Castle of

Versailles, I took the metro out to Le Vésinet, the town I had lived in when I was younger.

Earlier that week, I had printed out directions sent from my brother, who had been old enough to walk alone to and from the metro when we lived there (I was only nine at the time). His memory was excellent, because I arrived perfectly at the home I had not seen in eleven years.



My home in Le Vésinet

I stood in awe, staring at the house that felt so familiar. The stucco siding, the glass and iron front door. There was even still a visible path along the front gate where my dog had run back and forth as pedestrians had passed in front of the yard. I peeked through the gate as long as I could, relishing the memories that were made in that house. Memories of birthday parties, of broken bones, of Christmases, and of Sunday dinners on the patio. When I finally turned and walked back toward the metro, I recognized a sense of contentment unrivaled on any other part of my study abroad trip thus far. I was alone in a place where no one spoke my language, halfway across the world from my family, and yet I had found familiarity. For the first time since leaving JFK Airport that January, I was not experiencing something new or exotic, but something comfortable. Something normal.

6. Prague



First Course: Vegetable Soup

Potatoes, carrots, mushrooms and other ambiguous vegetables litter a steamy, flavorless broth. I slurp the liquid up regardless, thankful to have something warm to fill my belly with after touring the icy streets of Prague that morning. A Czech bachelor party behind me adds some flavor to the course with their rowdy drinking songs. I raise a mug of frothy beer in their direction while dipping sliced sourdough into my bowl.

It's not my host mother's zuppa, but it'll do.



Second Course: Beef and Cream and Dumplings

As I dig into my dish, I see the vegetarian across the table from me pick at the pile of raw vegetables on her plate. I guess traditional Czech menus don't include a vegetarian option.

Tongue collides with dumpling. Soft, chewy, aerated dough sinks with the weight of the rich cream sauce. Although infused with the beef's flavor, the sauce was unexpectedly sweet and tangy. Tender beef falls to pieces as I shovel bite after bite of the dish in. I am stuffed but I continue, trained by dinners with my host mother. In Italy, you never refuse seconds.



Third Course: Apple Strudel

Stomach heavy with broth and cream, I muster the grit to make it through a few bites of dessert. Apples, nuts, cinnamon, and chewy pastry enter my mouth coldly. Defeated by the heaviness of the previous dishes, I could only manage two bites. I wave a flag to the Czech lunch.

This was my first taste of Czech food, and it was good; my Italy has simply spoiled my taste. I sink back and wonder what my host mother was having for dinner.

7. Venice

It was pouring outside and we had finally found cover in a tiny pizzeria on a narrow side street. We were on a weekend trip to Venice, organized through our study abroad program. Our supervisors had given us the afternoon to explore and three friends and I had gone to the islands of Murano and Burano to see the famous Venetian glass and colorful homes for which they are famous. Now in a warm and dry pizzeria, we requested the Wi-Fi password and set about reconnecting with our friends and family back home.

I checked my messages and email, but nothing came through. Moving on to social media, I scrolled through Instagram pictures that my classmates had posted earlier of gondolas and lasagna lunches. We had been the only group that had left the main collection of islands, and we knew everyone else would be envious when they learned what we had seen.

Murano is a ferry ride away from the group of islands that make up Venice. The island is known for some of the most beautiful glass in the world. We had wandered the streets, walking in and out of jewelry, bead, and décor shops filled with magnificent handcrafted pieces. In Burano, we had toured the brightly colored waterfront homes for which the island is known. Aside from a little rain, the day had been amazing.

After checking Instagram, I opened up my Facebook. The friends sitting at the table with me were all silently checking their phones as well. They were giggling as they scrolled through funny texts or emails sent to them by their friends and family.

We broke our social media session briefly to order bellinis when the server approached us. After clinking our glasses in celebration of the day, we returned to our phones.

I had been scrolling through my newsfeed for a few minutes before I finally noticed the message icon at the top of my screen. I saw that the message was from my brother, who was

twenty-eight and rarely used his Facebook. *That's odd*, I thought, and clicked the button to bring up my messages.

Before opening it, I saw that the preview revealed the message began with, "Everyone is okay." My stomach dropped. I frantically opened it and read quickly.

"Oh my god," I said, clasping a hand over my mouth.

"What?" Sarah, who was sitting beside me, said.

I didn't know what to say, so I just read the message aloud.

"Everyone is okay, so don't worry. But there was a fire at mom and dad's house last night. Even Bo [our dog] is fine, but the house is pretty badly damaged."

Speechless, my friends stared at me.

Finally, Alanna said, "What happened?"

"I don't know." I opened up my email and sent a message to my mom.

She responded immediately, saying that everyone had been trying to get into touch with me but the messages weren't going through.

I typed "I'm in Venice for the weekend," through tears. *How can this be happening?*

Once my mother informed me that everyone was safe and no one was hurt, I asked about the house.

"We lost everything," she said.

I hung my head and started sobbing in the middle of the restaurant. *How could my family be going through this in Connecticut while I was 4,000 miles away?*

Everyone was speechless. We paid our checks and left to find the hotel in silence.

Venice is a compilation of islands, connected through winding streets and bridges. The roads and squares are poorly labeled, and extremely complicated to navigate. We had so much

trouble finding our way that the two-mile walk took us over an hour. My friends desperately marched on, leading a silent Kalli at the back of the group. All I could think about was getting back to talk to my family.

When we finally got to the hostel, I sat down on the spiral staircase that ran through the middle of the lobby up to all of the rooms because it was the only spot in the place that received Wi-Fi. As my classmates and other hotel guests shuffled awkwardly by me, I called my brother and mom who informed me what had happened.

A fire had started the night before and had continued into the morning. My mom, dad, and sister had been home, but they were all fine. Everything was gone. And no, I could not come home early from my trip.

They told me about how they were all doing fine, helping each other through the shock of the event. My older sister had come down to be with them from her home in Connecticut, and my brother would be up from DC later that day. They told me not to worry.

Sitting in that stairwell in Venice, I had never felt farther away from anything. All I wanted to do was be with my family in Connecticut, and instead I was on an island off the coast of Italy by myself. I cried, feeling a world away from everything that mattered to me.

After I hung up with my mom, perhaps in an attempt to feel closer, I decided to gather more details. I opened my browser and typed “Fire in Connecticut,” adding my home address. Images of my family’s home engulfed in flames popped onto the screen. Sobbing, I read the text underneath the image that explained how trucks had been called from three neighboring towns because the fire had been so aggressive.

What pained me the most was that in the corner of the image I saw my father, mother, and sister huddling in my front yard. They were standing back, wearing only their pajamas, watching the destruction of our home.

I walked into my hotel room, where three friends who had not been with me earlier were hanging out and giggling inside. Once they saw my swollen eyes, they stopped talking and stared. I got onto one of the beds, laid my head in Mel's lap, and cried.

They waited for me to explain myself, sitting in awkward silence. After my breathing returned, I told them what had happened.

"There was a fire at my house," I said. "Everyone's okay, but we lost everything."

At first, they each just stared at me with gaping mouths.

Finally, Mary said, "How did it happen?"

I shook my head, indicating that I didn't know.

Trying to comfort me, Mary and Lauren immediately began whispering condolences such as "You'll be fine," and "Your family will get through this." Though appreciated, they didn't help. I couldn't get past the shock. *This happened to MY family? What are we going to do? Why am I not home with them?*

As I sat there crying in front of friends I had just met two months ago, I wondered how I would ever make it through the rest of the trip. How could I go on museum tours and wine tastings when I knew my family was sitting in a hotel somewhere making lists of our belongings for the insurance companies? How could I bring them back trinkets from my travels knowing that those measly things would be the only items they owned now? It would be impossible.

That's when Mel, who hadn't spoken, grabbed my shoulder and looked at me. She stared not with awkwardness or pity, but with true tears of empathy in her eyes. Saying nothing, she made a connection and I knew her heart was breaking too.

She was feeling my pain, struggling through the shock right with me. I laid my head back in her lap and cried for the rest of the night like that, realizing I wasn't alone.

8. Where Does Your Cheese Come From?

Excited students holding their ticket numbers take up every table in the cramped restaurant. “Cinquanta cinque” the chef calls out from behind the counter. Each table of students glances up, looks down at their ticket, and then shifts nervously in their seats until relieved of their anxiety when the chef calls out again, “Fifty five” in a broken English accent. A timid blonde from a nearby table gets up and grabs her order from the chef, passing us on her way back. Staring at her pizza, we take note of the bubbling mozzarella dotting a layer of fresh tomato sauce, all atop a thick crust that is dusty with flour from the wood-fired oven.

Pizza in Italy is not just a cliché, but a way of life. The Americanized fantasy of a rosy-cheeked animated foreigner spinning massive blankets of dough in the air are replaced in real Florentine pizzerias by young, handsome locals as passionate about their ingredients as they are about flirting with American college students.

“A heart-shaped pie for una bella donna,” they say, handing their creation to a blushing student.

It is early January and the pizzeria we’re sitting in is Gusta Pizza, right off the Santa Spirito in Florence, Italy. The room feels packed. In April, we would come to realize what a crowded Gusta Pizza actually meant. The first tricklings of summer tourists would head to Italy and cram into tiny buildings for a taste of authentic Italian pizza.

Most weekdays, we saunter across the street from our school building and into Gusta’s doors to try their weekly special or the classic

Margherita. Unlike the American version, marguerite pizzas in Italy are not topped with sliced tomatoes, but made simply with tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella, and basil. Favorite specials encountered at Gusta pizza are their spinach and ricotta pizza, quattro formaggio pie, and the all-time favorite: the pesto and sundried tomato pizza.



Authentic Italian pizza and cuisine in general is known for its use of fresh, local ingredients. The pesto is blended using leaves plucked from fresh basil plants in nearby gardens. Prosciutto isn’t simply defined by its pinkish color and paper-thin texture, but categorized by the region where it was produced. In fact, it is impossible to fully understand the importance Italy places on its ingredients until you comprehend the different uses and flavors of prosciutto di Parma versus prosciutto di San Daniele.

A lot of what characterizes Italian food is regionalism. Different parts of Italy cling tightly to their reputations

for the best parmesan, dark chocolate, or Pinot Grigio. Food is not just a part of the culture of Italy, but a major component in Italian identity and the way Italians see themselves.

During the three months I lived in Italy, I stayed with a host mother named Elizabetta. Originally from Rome, Elizabetta was a passionate home cook with a full grasp of both traditional Roman and Florentine dishes. Each night before we sat down for dinner, she would explain the origins of the dish we were about to consume.

“This is carbonara, from Rome. It’s one of the most popular dishes there.”

I sat at the table, ready for a plate of pasta drenched in a thick, creamy sauce littered with hunks of bacon. Instead, the pasta was not drenched, but lightly covered in a mixture of egg and parmesan, and there were six tiny crumbles of meat on the entire plate. I was in shock. Carbonara had always been a favorite dish of mine, and here I was, confronted with a lack-luster imposter made by my host mother, who is from the region for which the dish is known.

I knew it was rude to question an Italian woman’s cooking, so I kept my mouth shut. Instead, I twisted a few strands of spaghetti around my fork and took a hesitant bite.

Why I had been nervous, I am no longer sure, because the dish was magnificent. Rich with creamy parmesan flavor, it was better than any carbonara I had ever had before. And those tiny chunks? They were flecks of pancetta, an incredibly salty meat

loaded with flavor. My host mom had even put her own twist on the Roman classic with a dollop of homemade ricotta on top. *Homemade ricotta.*

Here I was, tasting a traditional Roman dish made by a traditional Roman woman. Her knowledge of the history, culture, and language of the city was infused into every bite of that homemade pasta. I even knew where my cheese came from: the kitchen just down the hallway. Incredible. .

When I had first tasted a marguerite pizza from Gusta, I had been similarly hesitant. Upon first glance, Italian pizzas appear to be lacking in a significant ingredient: mozzarella cheese. Gusta pizzas are about ten inches in diameter, a pretty significant size for a personal pizza.

Despite their dimensions, they are usually topped with three to five one-inch balls of mozzarella. Accustomed to American pizzas, where almost every inch is covered in a thick layer of cheese, the appearance of the Italian version is off-putting. The cheese is the best part, how could there be so little of it? But a lot of cheese doesn't equate to quality.

In Italy, where a cheese comes from and how it was made matters more than how much of it there is. A simple dollop of homemade ricotta is better than the entire pre-grated parmesan supply at the local grocery store. This concept is simple and yet it doesn't seem to translate to the States.

Next time you are out to pizza, I challenge you to think like an Italian. When the server asks how they can help you, instead of requesting an

extra cheese shaker, try inquiring about where that cheese came from. The reputable restaurants may know the answer, but most will not.

Instead of mindlessly consuming the processed foods we are accustomed to, we need to go into our meals consciously. Like the Italians, we should ask the important questions. How did this dish originate? What does it mean in a cultural context? And, most importantly, where did the cheese come from?

9. La Cena

Apperitivo

Prosciutto.
From San Daniele, of course.
Only the best for mom and sister's first
night in.
Their first time having prosciutto.
Strictly San Daniele from now on.

Fresh mozzarella recommended to me
in broken English.
Thank you, sir.
Slices scattered on a plate with olives
and speck.
How very Italiano.

Chilled bottles of Prosecco in the
freezer.
Mom says "Prosecco and gelato at
least once a day."
We manage not to miss either.

Airport hugs.
Apartment hugs.
Prosecco hugs.
Prosciutto hugs.

Primi Piatti

First course is typically meat.
They don't know that.
I serve eggplant caprese.

Grilled eggplants,
Melted mozzarella,
Pomodoro,
Olio.

They're impressed.

I ask mom how she is.
"Not yet," she says
and takes a bite.

Secondi

Carbonara, of course,
the Italian way.
Pancetta, raw eggs, and lots of
Parmigiano reggiano.

I use bucatini, a fancy
spaghetti-like noodle with
a center hole
like a straw.
I say “It’s *very Italian.*”

I cook to impress.
I cook to say I love you.
I cook to show my Italy.
I cook to comfort.

Later, I tell my host mother
I cooked carbonara.
“Brava!” she says.
I tell her I used bucatini.
“Oh no,” she says.
“Bucatini never goes with
Carbonara.”
How very Americano.

Dolce

We walk for gelato.
I show them my city
I show them Santa Croce
I show them my gelato place.
It’s closed tonight.

I educate them:
“Gelato piled high
and beautifully garnished
is for tourists.
Not good.
Great gelato won’t
even appear delicious.

The best gelato, I tell them,
is invisible under lids.”

They insist on
beautiful gelato.
We order lemon, because
I always order lemon.
This is how I gauge.

Mom and Alysse love it.
I shake my head. Not good.
They shake their heads at me.

In the gelateria,
Mom sees an apron hanging.

She thinks of kitchens.
She thinks of counters.
She thinks of the dishes
she lost last week.

No aprons for mom, she thinks.
Mom doesn't have a kitchen.
Mom doesn't have counters.
Mom doesn't have anything.

We sit around beautiful
tear-soaked gelato
in Santa Croce, holding
each other.

Even in Italy
we see the ashes.

Digestivo

More Prosecco at
the apartment.
More hugs,
more tears.

Mom puts on pajamas
I don't recognize.
Alysse talks about a boyfriend
I don't know.
And I realize how far Italy is
from home.

Between sips
I tell them stories.
About pizza, about
bridges, about museums
and school.

Once, during a story
about a flight
to Morocco, mom laughs.
The first time in five
days, she says.
I smile.
And I realize how far Italy is
from home.

Theoretical Component

When I began my senior project for the JMU Honors Program, I thought I had a good idea of what the final product would be. In the project proposal, I had pitched “a collection of travel essays” from my semester studying abroad in Florence, Italy. While I was abroad, I had written a blog where I would update friends and family on my adventures throughout Europe. I had assumed that my senior project would simply be a reworking of the blog posts I had written, with some literary technique thrown in along the way. What transpired instead was a more thoughtful look at what had really occurred during that semester abroad. The people I had met became characters, the places I had been became settings, and the events that occurred became pieces of a larger thread that would come to define that experience.

Genre/Form Decision

The first deviation from my original project plan was the introduction of multiple genres to the creative component. In my proposal, I had written that I expected the style of my writing to reflect influence from both Anthony Bourdain and John McPhee. I wanted to be bold and take my readers on an adventure in the way Bourdain does with his travel journal *No Reservations*. In this book, Bourdain travels the world giving both hilarious and outrageous commentary on the places and food he experiences. In a completely different vein, I also wanted to weave in literary elements in the style of John McPhee. In his article, “Structure,” written for the *New Yorker*, McPhee describes the structure of writing through a series of anecdotes, research, and metaphors. His ability to convey a complex topic through familiar concepts was something I hoped to capture in my own writing. Both of these influences, I believed, would aid my effort to produce a collection that would be both exciting and important.

Along with my expectation that these two authors would heavily influence my writing, I expected to write only narrative short stories. In “Structure,” McPhee writes, “To some extent, the structure of a composition dictates itself.” This is exactly what occurred with my own writing. I was pulled in new directions by the content I was producing. Instead of forcing the pieces into narrative form, I decided to try out new genres and see what happened.

The result was better than I had expected. Writing in more than one genre allowed me to draw from multiple influences and really explore my skills as a writer. Before starting a piece, I would consider the content and evaluate how best to convey the information. I would research examples of a particular genre and mimic or allow myself to be influenced by those examples.

The first illustration of this deviation from narrative form was with the piece “Where Does Your Cheese Come From?” I knew I wanted to discuss both Italian food and the cultural passion for ingredients, and I felt a journalistic approach would best complement those topics. I researched food articles and food blogs and came across a piece called “Pizza and Parenthood” in the *New York Times*. The author Jennifer Boylan describes the emotional milestone of sending her youngest son off to college while weaving in anecdotal tidbits about pizza and tradition. I used her article as a model for my own piece, intertwining personal anecdotes with a discussion of Italian food culture. I felt the resulting piece was much better than it otherwise would have been because I had taken the extra step to research the genre beforehand.

This piece was also a learning experience for me because the formatting was a change from what I had been working with. Rather than a double-spaced page with traditional dimensions, I was working with three columns, a picture, a bold title, and a border. I had some issues formatting the piece and keeping the design the way I wanted it to be. Because of the obstacles I had to overcome with this piece, I was able to grow in my knowledge of page design.

Using that experience, I wrote another piece (“Wine and Italian Culture”) and was much more prepared with how the formatting should be done.

Another piece where the genre was influenced by the content was the final poem, “La Cena.” In this case, I felt the content pulling me toward poetry and went with it. I had the idea, started to write, and felt as if the piece wrote itself despite my having little experience with poetry. I believe this worked best in my entire collection because the form really complements the content. I did not force myself to conform to the project concept that I had developed a year ago, and the piece was better off because of that.

There was one piece where the genre eluded me and that was the chapter on Prague. I had initially written this as a lengthy blog-like travel reflection where I essentially recorded the events of my weekend in the city. After discussing with my advisor Kevin Jefferson, I decided to completely rework the piece and format it as a single page description of a meal, which I had hoped might convey a deeper meaning. In a meeting with my reader Karen McDonnell, she told me that the Prague piece still felt out of place and Professor Jefferson agreed. Despite effort, the Prague piece never really captured what I was hoping it would. Upon reflection, however, I think that is okay. Eight out of the nine stories in this collection work with what I was trying to accomplish. In my writing classes, we discuss how writers never truly feel as if their work is complete because there is always something that can be improved upon. I guess the Prague piece is my example of that.

Themes

Once the writing was completed, I assessed the compilation as a whole. The collection amounted to about seventy pages of information that was hopefully linked together by something other than the fact that I had written it. My next step was to figure out what it all meant.

The process began with a blog that I kept during my semester abroad. I wrote to keep my family and friends updated on the event of my trip, as well as to gain practice in travel writing. The blog (<https://affamatodivita.wordpress.com/>) was what I thought would be the foundation of my collection. I thought I would draw from the blog posts, or simply edit them, and hand that in as my final project. Instead, I ended up using these posts as a reference for content, but nothing more.

In the summer of 2014, I had created a list of eleven chapter ideas that I felt should be somewhere in the collection. As I wrote, I would refer to this list and sometimes divide, combine, or even remove ideas from the list. The writing started to take shape and I could see themes developing such as friendship, finding oneself abroad and the idea of “home” (both finding one abroad and losing one in the U.S.). Unsure of which theme would be the overarching purpose of the collection, I continued with my writing.

In February of 2015, I began the editing phase of my project and reviewed the collection more critically. In March, I met with my advisor, who revealed some themes he felt permeated the writing. Next, I created a descriptive outline, generating a list of the pieces and the theme I hoped each piece conveyed. What I found upon reflection of the list was that many of the earlier pieces discuss being lost and unfamiliar with surroundings, even some glimpses of homesickness. In the later pieces, I discover comforts abroad in the form of an old home, an Italian meal, and my family visiting. Professor Jefferson pointed out the use of “my city” to characterize this familiarization. This led me to the title of the collection “Finding Home.”

I was finding a home in a new place—Florence. I was rediscovering a place I used to call home when I went to Paris. I lost what I knew to be home in a fire that happened 4,000 miles away. In a couple of our meetings, Kevin Jefferson mentioned a novel by Thomas Wolfe called *You Can't Go Home Again*. In the novel, Wolfe illustrates how one can never truly go back because our perception of home is forever altered the minute we leave. Our experiences, opinions, and view of the world transform and therefore we cannot help but view “home” as something different than what it was originally. Upon reflection, I realized that my experience had illustrated the same theme as Wolfe’s novel. What I believed to be home was irrevocably changed during my time abroad, both physically and conceptually, and I could not go home again. I was grasping for an old idea of “home,” while also redefining what the word meant to me, thus the title “Finding Home.”

Now that I had discovered the theme of the collection, I realized that the chronological direction in which the pieces had originally been ordered was not the appropriate method. I constructed the order thematically, starting the collection with stories where I was attempting to orient myself with my new surroundings. The stories then led into a lengthy piece about Morocco, where I experienced fear and complete vulnerability. Next, I encountered a taste of familiarity when I travelled to Paris and reacquainted myself with my former home. I think the comfort of the Paris piece balances the total anxiety of the Morocco piece, allowing the reader to continue. Following the Paris piece was the page on Prague. As previously mentioned, this one fell short of what I had hoped it would accomplish. Through the description of the meal, and my comparing it to my host mother’s cooking, I was attempting to establish an increasing comfort with my base city, Florence. In this order, I felt the Prague piece would illustrate how I was beginning to redefine my concept of home to include Italy.

After that, I placed the Venice narrative where I lost my American home to a fire. This shook my concept of home from a theoretical “you can’t go home” to the reality that I would never physically return. I switched to a journalism piece, “Where does your cheese come from?” in an effort to relieve the reader emotionally and to reconnect the idea of growing familiarity with Italy. As I pulled away from my American home, I connected more with my new home. Finally, I explored poetry in the final piece and concluded the collection in the same way I concluded the trip: with the sense that this was only the beginning of an emotional journey to find home.

The effort of organizing the pieces really forced me to consider what I wanted the collection to mean. It became more than just a compilation of smaller pieces but a larger story. This was a great opportunity to develop a major work and really put in the effort to make each detail count for the whole.

Time Management

The biggest challenge with which this project presented me was self-motivation. The project was set up so that I could work at my own pace, without having to worry about due dates. The issue with this was that I had never worked in this way, and I had trouble motivating myself to do work without the incentive a graded assignment would have.

In the first month of the fall 2014 semester, I did not accomplish much for the project because of this. I then realized that something needed to be done. I met with my advisor and discussed a plan to create due dates to which he would hold me accountable. Each meeting, I would develop an assigned task to be completed by our next meeting. This worked better for me because I had someone to disappoint other than myself if I did not complete my work. Once we

developed this plan, the project moved forward smoothly and I was able to accomplish my proposed goal of writing two-thirds of the chapters for the collection by the end of that semester.

Sticking to my timeline was an important step in being able to really take the time this spring 2015 semester to explore form and themes of the collection rather than rushing to complete work that I had neglected. This was the most valuable skill that this project allowed me to hone because it will help me transition into a career where a lot of work is self-monitored.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the past year, I am proud of the work I have done with my Senior Honors Project. I put in the effort to pace myself in the writing and editing of the collection and the final product displays this time and attention. I was able to explore new forms and genres with which I was unfamiliar, really honing my skills as a writer. In addition to writing a collection of stories, I worked on thematically linking each piece to a greater idea to create a cohesive product. I am not only proud of the work I have done but the method with which I accomplished everything, breaking up the project into smaller due dates to ensure that the proper time and attention was given to each task. I look forward to applying the skills I have sharpened with this project in a career after I graduate this May.