

Pictured: Portrait of the Artist as an Exchange Student

“You will return to your old room, your old house, your old life. Things will resume as normal. The truth is, study abroad is not the time to find yourself. Face it, it won’t actually change you or your life.”

On December 5th 2009, Amanda Knox pleads not guilty to the murder of her roommate, Meredith Kercher. What started as a study abroad ends in 1 murder, 2 trials, 2 appeals, and 4 years in prison. On February 15th 2014, Andrea Heckler spills coffee on an aloof French boy. What started as a study abroad ends in 1 black cat, 2 months of dating, 2 Parisian apartments, and 4 years of marriage. On May 8th 2017, I come out as queer for the first time.

Pictured: A young girl, smiling into the camera. Cheeks flushed, hair tousled, eyes bright. Perfect in the way that can only be fabricated. Her new friends slightly out of focus, laughing in the background. She stands on a narrow cobblestone street. The Eiffel Tower shines and sparkles like a set piece, flawlessly. Her happiness spills out of the frame infecting you, the viewer. Her smile glows and says “This is my favourite memory.”

Cliché isn't it? Look, I am well aware of the “young girl finds herself while studying abroad in Europe” thing. The “wow you can buy wine in grocery stores and the culture is so different” thing. The “maybe this is the only place I’ve truly felt free” thing. So here’s your warning: this essay is about that.

I think escape is at the root of all travel. From a luxurious resort vacation in Mexico, to a volunteer trip in Thailand, to a weekend away with friends in Banff. Someone is always trying to get away from something. That “thing” will be different depending on the circumstance: an overbearing boss, a lost sense of identity, a looming set of deadlines. All things we would rather avoid than deal with. For me it was a failing relationship, friends who I was growing to know less and less each day, and an upcoming 20th birthday accusing me of having no true

purpose in life. Fleeing, I packed my bags and flew across the world to a small town nestled in the French Alps, where I lived for 6 weeks.

Pictured: A girl in a too-bright grocery store aisle, florescent lights bouncing off linoleum flooring. She studies a jar of premade pasta sauce, pretending to understand the instructions on the label. The dull hum of pop music and hasty French conversations embraces her, shrouding her in anonymity. Catching only fragments of conversation, she translates in her head. Blinks. Realizes these people will never see her again. Restraints and expectations dissolve. Liberation. A French couple brushes past her and she realizes that perhaps she has been fixed in this spot for too long. Puts down the pasta sauce. Moves on.

On a study abroad, you wear that bold lipstick you've never been brave enough for. On a study abroad, you smile at that person you find cute, dare them to look back in a way that feels foreign at home. On a study abroad, you hang out with the girls who feel cooler than you, smoke your first cigarette, go to a fancy club for the first time. Make unlikely friends with a Spanish guy on the dance floor, take a cab back to your hostel through the sleepy Barcelona streets at 4 am, alone. Glance out the window as the cab driver asks you if you have been dancing. You lift your separate cultures towards each other with laughs and smiles, let hand gestures or mimed actions fill the spaces that language cannot. Wake up the next morning at 7, get ready to do it all over again. You laugh loudly, live loudly, do everything loudly. The clichés try to accuse you of exaggeration, of living in that unabashed way fit only for Hollywood movies. On a study abroad, you stare back and dare them to make you stop.

Pictured: Two girls seated in the town square, drinking Heinekens from the local Haagen-Dazs. Heads thrown back in raucous laughter, unmitigated happiness and belonging rings through the air. The surrounding locals glance in judgement, eyes suspicious of their loud English exclamations. "Les étrangers"

one scoffs, the others nod in agreement. The girls remain for several hours, oblivious to anything other than each other.

On a study abroad, I tell a new friend Salta that I am queer. Exhale afterwards. Months, years, lifetimes of obligations leak out my pores. Every secret or white lie falls to the side. I breathe lightly for the first time in what feels like forever. And that is not a cliché. She smiles back, says nothing other than “Cool!” She tells me about her new boyfriend, their new relationship and how much she misses him. We exchange stories like playing cards, growing closer every time we deal out a new hand. Talk openly about mental health, religion, our parents. She challenges me on political issues, pushes me to consider a mixture of fact and feeling, where I have always favoured the latter. We purchase countless fresh raspberry custard tarts that we will eat with our hands, fingertips sticky as the pastry melts on our tongues. Between baguettes and bottles of rosé, I confide that I am scared of everything. I talk truthfully. Listen.

I will say this: perhaps it is cliché to chalk every ounce of my evolution up to this blossoming friendship. But I am not sure I care. Instead, I flip through the rolodex of my memory, searching for a metaphor to describe the unhindered laughter we shared. For the way this new friendship felt rattling around in my heart. For how we stretched out our palms, collecting raindrops and honesty. I always come up short. And I know I do not care. I have 1 bottle of beer, 2 toothy grins, 2 scoops of pistachio gelato, and 4 hours of nonstop conversation. And for now that is enough.

Pictured: A teenage girl's bedroom, straight out of the movies. Walls bright blue, cotton candy bedspread. Shabby posters taped and tacked to every wall. Several bookcases, shelves overfilled, books spilling onto the floor. Titles like “Anna and the French Kiss” and “Maybe in Paris.” Edith Piaf crackles through the air. Girl sits on the bed, mind quite obviously elsewhere.

I have been dreaming of Paris since I was a preteen, devouring teen romance novels where an ordinary American girl falls in love with an enchanting French boy, who always has an equally enchanting French name. Something like Jacques or Étienne or Pierre. You know the one. I watch Audrey Hepburn clutch multi-coloured balloons in front of the *Arc de Triumph* while Fred Astaire tells her to run. I watch Amélie bustle through the streets, whimsical and unrestrained just like the accordion music that accompanies her. She leads a blind man to a metro station, falls in love with a boy who collects photographs. A perfectly positioned painting of the Eiffel Tower hangs on my wall. Later, almost 19 years old, a study abroad program will fall in my lap, and I prepare to fly across the world, unaware of the journey that I will find there.

Pictured: A teenage boy, approximately 17, with a pride flag clasped around his shoulders like a cape. He stands in the street with 3 other friends, similar in age and attire, decked out in rainbow. They laugh, mouths opening to the sky, bodies shaking with bliss. A family of American tourists collectively rolls their eyes, briskly elbows their way past the teenagers. Unaware, the boy spins in a circle, letting the flag fan out behind him. Unapologetic. "Can you believe we are here?" he shouts. The others smile in response, voices overlapping into a cacophony of community. They wrap each other up in brazen belonging, shield themselves from harm or hurt. It cannot reach them today. Today, they traverse what feels like the entirety of Paris. Careen past the Louvre, fly over the Pont de la Concorde, hurtle through the Notre Dame, rush under the Arc de Triumph. Perpetually moving and always slightly out of reach, threatening to escape the frame.

On June 24th 2017, approximately 100,000 people take to the streets for Paris's 39th annual *Marche des Fiertés*, the Pride Parade. On June 25th 2017, I arrive in Paris at 6 pm, approximately 26 hours too late. Besides, I tell myself,

you probably wouldn't even go anyways. I have not yet come out to the people I am with.

This does stop my dreaming on the train ride in. I glance out the window, while the TGV hums beneath me. Images of attending the largest pride parade in the world play out on my corneas. I imagine feeling at home amongst people like me, even in a country that is not mine, that converses in a language I barely speak. I imagine walking through Parisian streets, the footsteps of Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney, Radclyffe Hall falling beside me. I imagine being amidst loud music, smiling bodies brushing shoulders, countless flags whipping through the wind.

Instead, I go to some busy tourist attraction, feet swollen and limbs weary from lifetimes of walking, glance at some painting that I will surely forget in one week, one month, one year. I eat an overpriced baguette sandwich and dodge men trying to sell me yet another Eiffel Tower keychain, breath caught in my chest once again. I carry myself down Paris's Left Bank, make my way to Shakespeare & Co, hoping to find some sort of reprieve. Instead, it is also bursting at the seams, English frantically bouncing around the small space. The only site of solace is the preserved library of Sylvia Beach. I step over the threshold, through a frame that lost its door several decades ago. The floor sighs beneath my feet, embracing my visitation with cracks and creaks as if to say "Thank you for visiting" and "I am so happy to have you here." Old books sit on the shelves, paper threatening to crumble into nothingness with the graze of human fingertips. Here is the only place that the frenzied hum of people does not penetrate. Lower your voice to a whisper when you step inside. Sylvia's ghost spirals around the room, telling you tales of James Joyce and friends, how they gathered to share poetry and prose, air thick with conversation. How fitting that this becomes my favourite place in Paris.

On May 28th 2017, the small sleepy city I called home for my short study abroad hosts its own gay pride parade. I miss this event also, taking a short 2-hour bus ride to Geneva instead. Once I return, my classmate tells me she went. “It was fun,” she remarks. “Small, but fun. A few assholes with homophobic signs, but I suppose that’s to be expected.”

On June 6th 2018, approximately 1 year later, I remain in Edmonton. Stuck in a confining cubicle, I think wistfully of my time elsewhere. Block out the florescent lights and carpet caught in the wrong era, I replace it with my technicolour memory. Revisit the few photos I managed to take, quickly snapped between classes or conversations. I find out that my hotel was positioned directly across the Seine from *Le Marais*, the LGBTQ neighbourhood in Paris. I add it as a destination on my ever-growing list, knowing that one day I will return to make up for what I missed.

Pictured: Tiny hotel room, more a closet than anything else. Two girls sit, one on the bed, one on the floor. The emotional space between them is insurmountable, despite their forced physical closeness. The air is saturated with silence. The girl on the floor gets up, opens the window under the guise of “letting fresh air in.” Really, she needs street noise to fill the large fractures between them. Conversations from passersby and the rumble of car engines floats up to the 4th floor hotel window. It is not enough, the silence remains.

At the end of my trip, I briefly meet up with an old friend. Our respective programs happen to align perfectly. I’ve known her since we were children, navigating our messy adolescence with coloured braces and insecurity. We fall in and out of contact regularly. She becomes the sort of friend where comfort draws you close rather than compatibility. Our shared history is extensive, our actual connection limited. I tell her about how changed I feel, the wonderful people I’ve met, all the new adventures I went on. I skip down cobblestones, proudly

inhabiting my new sense of self, confidence trailing behind me like an overinflated helium balloon.

“This one time, my roommate brought home 5 random French guys from down the road. We talked until 4am.” Eye roll. “And this girl in my apartment complex had a telescope, she showed me the surface of the moon.”

She scoffs, brushes me off with an “Oh please. It can’t have been that transformative. I’m sure you could have done all the same things back home; it wouldn’t have been any different.”

My footsteps falter, I walk a little slower, my smile dims. Later, tipsy on 3-euro beer hastily purchased from the convince store down the block, I will come out again, finally feeling comfortable to sit and tell her about my identity. I have been meaning to have this conversation with her for 6 months, but it never felt like the right time. There was always some excuse to retreat back into normality, back into the version of myself she knew, even if I was no longer that person.

She looks alarmed, says “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? How come you hid this from me for so long?” Asks me in the same breath if “I ever want to have children then because you know those alternative methods of conceiving often lead to breast cancer and I’m really trying to just look out for your health.” Deflated, I return to my own room. Send Salta a message. “I know it has only been a couple days since we parted ways, but I miss you.”

“Here’s the truth, study abroad will not define you.”

My roommate escapes her strict Muslim family to drink and go to clubs, hook up with fit rugby players she will never see again. My friend escapes graduation, postponing reality for another 6 weeks of freedom, trading deadlines for mountaintops, dissertations for mulled wine. I escape my stifled sexuality and repressive relationships to smile and converse openly, make friends without expectations of who I once was or who I will become, only who I am in this moment. Of course a study abroad starts off as an escape. Of course we change

along the way. Maybe our escapes are unsuccessful, maybe the changes don't stick. But maybe they do.

On May 8th 2017, I come out as queer for the first time. On July 4th 2017, I return home and come out again, this time to my family. On June 9th 2018, I go to Pride (in Edmonton). On December 4th 2018, I write an essay about coming out.

Pictured: Mountain air, tart raspberries, stinky cheese, soft bread. An overexposed, blurry photo, details indistinguishable. Objects bleeding together, no concrete divisions or boundaries. No sparkling Eiffel Tower. No enchanting accordion. No romantic cobblestones. Only a light blue sky, clear and cloudless.

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