

MELTING ROAD: HAPPINESS IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

by

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Abstract

A heat wave in Europe kills over a thousand a week and melts the sticky, black asphalt of the highway reststops. Neoliberal austerity and growing inequality beneath the banking towers of London signal the depths of late capitalism. This creative thesis is a travel novel narrated by an unemployed Canadian looking for direction in life after the economic recession. He visits the UK during the hottest summer on record in order to reconnect with his half-brother, who is squatting in empty investment properties in London. As they party on a low-budget and hitchhike across Europe, the narrator is exposed to political and ethical anti-establishment arguments and faces the question of whether or not willing participants in neoliberalism are culpable for its failures. Blocked at the UK border, the narrator retreats from injustice to a beach commune in Spain. In the end, he must reconcile the freedom of escaping neoliberalism with the responsibility of opposing it and decide for himself how to find happiness in the age of climate change.

Opening Statement

This thesis responds to the following undeniable facts:

The years 2014, 2015, and 2016 each set the record for hottest year in global history with average temperatures warmer than any previously measured. Each year since has been hotter than 2014.

Warmer temperatures cause rising sea levels and an increased risk of drought, famines, forest fires, flooding, heat waves, hurricanes, and typhoons (IPCC). The disaster created by extreme weather events will be uneven; they threaten the lives of the world's impoverished significantly more than the world's wealthy.

Climate refugees have already had to flee their homelands due to climate-related disasters. The number of vulnerable displaced persons on the planet has surpassed even the aftermath of world war two (UNHRC). Regional food and water shortages will further increase the risk of conflict and resulting death, displacement, and trauma.

Greenhouse gas emissions from human industry and agriculture, the clear driving force behind this climate breakdown, have increased nearly every year since the first reports of their danger (Rosser and Ritchie). Despite 30 years of international climate negotiations, our rate of burning fossil fuels has not even begun to decrease.

The torching of our common ecosystem by profiteering interests is all the evidence that is necessary in the argument against unregulated capitalism. Climate change is the clearest indication that the ideology of neoliberalism is not suited to govern our precarious planet.

In the words of Naomi Klein, "This changes everything."

For my brother.

This academic work was produced on the unceded territory of the Wolastoqiyik,
a place bound by the Peace and Friendship Treaties of 1725-1779.

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Introduction:

The Apple of Discord

At the divine feast after the wedding of King Peleus and the Sea-Nymph Thetis, cups spilled over with jewelled wine. The fruit of the land was so plentiful inside the banquet hall that the deities in attendance amassed mountains of bananas and avocados on gold platters to admire rather than to eat. Outside the marble halls of King Peleus's mountain castle, the people of Phthia toiled with considerably less food than the King within. It was over the straw-roofed hovels of Phthia and into this wedding party of plenty that the goddess Discord rolled a single shiny, red apple.

My aim with *Melting Road* is to create such an apple. From a distance, I hope I have written my creative work to be noticeable, intriguing, and attractive. Throughout the novel, however, and at its ultimate conclusion, the narrator faces ethical dilemmas in a way that provokes a reader's cognitive dissonance and demands resolution. At the core of my creative work, I aim to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding our lack of response and responsibility to social problems like climate change under current paradigms of neoliberalism. This critical introduction will outline the aims of my creative thesis with reference to the conventions, criticisms, and inspirations of the travel writing genre and to the historical-political neoliberal context that *Melting Road* arises out of and responds to.

My creative thesis is a travel novel inspired by my own trips to Europe in 2012, 2013, and 2014-15. The story follows an unemployed Canadian narrator on a low-

budget journey through squats in London, highways in Germany, bars in Budapest, beaches in the Netherlands, catacombs in Paris, and on to a hippie commune in Spain before he must decide whether or not to return to Canada. On this trip, the narrator reconnects with his brother, manages ongoing mental illness, and experiences life enmeshed in the hedonistic and activist countercultures of Europe. Ultimately, the narrator is exposed to the political and ethical positions of squatters, protesters, and hippies, and at the end, he must decide for himself how one can find happiness in an age of climate change.

In part one of this introduction to my creative thesis, I dive into the genre of my thesis: travel writing. I consider what the label “travel writing” means for the truth value of my novel; I discuss the inspirations for my novel; and I navigate the conventions and criticisms of the genre in reflection on my work. In part two of this introduction, I explore what the truth value of my novel is meant to expose: its historical-political context of late capitalism. I historicize my text in its post-recession and pre-Brexit context; I look also at its place in ongoing discussions of mental illness and drug decriminalization; and I conclude by reflecting on what kind of response my travel writing can offer to neoliberalism.

To what aim am I directing my apple of discord? The theorist Kit Dobson asks hypothetically if a poet in the Canadian avant-garde could respond to neoliberalism with the line, “fuck capitalism,” and still have their poem displayed on a Calgary bus ad (146). Dobson is asking if a writer can openly condemn contemporary economic structures and still succeed within a market paradigm. He is implying that writers must necessarily concede in order to succeed in their careers. I believe he is right to suggest

this, but not because of some censoring power of capitalism. It is because any challenge to neoliberalism necessarily requires participation within it.

Part One

On the Surface, a Trip: Travel Writing in the 21st Century

The genre of travel writing is wide and multifaceted, but it has significant conventions and baggage that readers will see reflected in *Melting Road*. Readers often expect travel writing to contain significant grains of truth, and for my project, this is one of the strengths of its genre. Other writers have written about similar expeditions as I have, and so I consider their works in contrast. Some of their works also reveal criticisms that travel writing has earned, and so I reflect on those criticisms relative to my novel. In this section, I discuss *Melting Road's* engagement with the travel writing genre.

Travel writing is a diverse genre, but its texts all specifically engage with the wider world. In their separate surveys of secondary literature, Carl Thompson and Jan Born both note that many types of writing, from factual essay to fictional novel, wear the label of travel writing, and under this label, texts often cross over into other genres (C. Thompson 11 and Born 26). Thus, even where my novel includes elements of memoir and countercultural narrative, it still fits within travel writing. Importantly for my creative thesis, Born emphasizes that the extent to which readers trust travel writing to be non-fiction has shifted throughout the history of the genre (17). This means travel writers are afforded a degree of flexibility with the truth depending on which conventions they use. For example, Paul Fussell's narrow definition of travel writing

considers it only “a subspecies of memoir” in which the narrator “encounter[s] distant or unfamiliar data” and “claims literal validity” (203 qtd in C. Thompson 14). However, both Thompson and Born make the case that fictional novels like *Heart of Darkness* can be considered travel writing for their depictions of journeys to actual distant places. Where does my creative thesis fit on the spectrum between the poles of fiction and non-fiction?

One of the traits of travel writing is that readers will expect some level of representation of the truth of the world. Mary Campbell says that travel writing is a kind of “witness” that is “generically aimed at the truth” (2-3 qtd in c. Thompson 15). Travel writing often conveys reliable facts about location and frequently overlaps in genre with autobiography, as my writing appears to do. Both of these conventions mean that readers will expect my travel novel to convey some amount of straightforward information. Travel writing not only communicates a kind of cultural, figurative truth as all creative work does, but readers often interpret a travel writer’s statements about a geographic place and its political realities as literally true. This facet of the travel writing genre makes my narrator more trustworthy when, for example, he describes the country names scratched into the walls of the detainment room at the border at Dunkerque (Chapter 12). That writing was actually there on 2 September 2013. The assumed truth of such depictions in my novel aid my creative thesis in its goal of engaging with political context.

How much of my creative thesis is literally true? This question may spark interest for some readers, but it creates a mote of anxiety for me. My narrator experiences being rejected at an international border potentially because of what he wrote in his notebook. Whether that was the actual cause or not, he’ll never know and

always wonder. Power dynamics like borders, where guards have the absolute right of rejection over applicants without having to provide just cause, can create a system of soft censorship that I now find myself in. Under this kind of self-censorship, artists withhold or change the truth of what they would normally communicate because even though they do not face direct censorship, the threat of reprisal exists (Hayward TGI, 2013 16). If I claimed that everything in this creative thesis was literally true, would I find myself blocked at an international border sometime in the future?

I will say only that, similar to Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, my travel writing has elements of a *roman à clef*. Such constructions have a frame of truth overlaid with a façade of fiction. Carl Thompson acknowledges that all travel writing must at minimum be “economical” with the truth, for not everything can fit into a story: “a degree of fictionality is thus inherent in all travel accounts” (28). Mary Morris, in interview with me, suggests that all travel writers “can bring the tools of good narrative to bear on our raw material and craft it as need be” (qtd. in Hayward WYWH 24). Importantly, I did not simply change names to protect individuals as is common in a *roman à clef*; the characters in my novel with the names I gave them cannot respectfully be considered analogous for any specific living, breathing people. Note that my travel writing frequently describes fictional characters engaging in illegal activities. If this makes my work not genuine memoir and thus not genuine travel writing—by Fussell's limited definition—then it does. Composing my travel writing as a fiction frees me to use more of the techniques and structure of a novel. I combined and re-arranged genuine events into fictional scenes for the sake of the story. For example, this story of being rejected at the UK border (Chapter 12) combines my experiences of being detained at the UK border both in Calais in 2012 and Dunkerque in 2013. Other works use

historiographic metafictional elements, like the newspaper clippings in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, to elevate their claim to truth value. In contrast, the singular narrative voice of my novel creates the style of a fiction only loosely based on the truth. However, I can say here that everything described in my novel truly happened to someone somewhere, and you and I may both have met them. I did not embellish details for the sake of sensationalism. I combined characters and events that I knew of personally or secondhand for the sake of readability. I changed information for the sake of the safety of real people. Nonetheless, I took every precaution to present these fictional scenes and fictional characters, including my narrator, with sincerity and a general respect for the facts.

In preparing to write my fictionalized travel memoir, I looked for inspiration and lessons from several works that came before. The conventions of a story about low-cost travel on the fringes of society first came out of the early-modern picaresques of 1500s-1700s Europe. In this genre, a “disreputable” (C. Thompson 203) or roguish character goes on a series of “adventures or misadventures” (17). Many authors since have developed this tradition of a vagrant’s travel novel. My work follows somewhat in the footsteps of the journey of George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which also conveys the experiences of an unemployed visitor to those two expensive cities. Like my narrator witnessing income inequality between pub and squat near Barbarian, London (Chapter 2), Orwell depicts the stark difference between the lifestyles of the patrons and the workers in expensive restaurants (63). However, while Orwell admits he was witness only to the “fringe of poverty” while sleeping in rough places (254), he does not admit, as my narrator does, that he has a parent’s home he can return to. Orwell sought to claim more authenticity for his story of the streets of London by leaving that

part out. In truth, he and I were both economic migrants in search of better prospects. I feel there is no shame in our narrators being adults in their twenties who leave the countryside to make their own way in the big city. Both of our narrators are eager to see more of the world and are willing to sacrifice comfort to do it. Having a family home to return to in a rural area may mean both were more privileged than many of the people they met, but it does not undermine their positions as economic migrants leaving an area without jobs and looking for direction in life. In contrast to Orwell's, my narrator's discussion of his family life creates a more honest witness to his era's political and economic inequality.

Similar to Orwell's novel and the novels of other male authors whom I reference, like Ernest Hemingway and Jack Kerouac, my work is largely a masculine story with women in secondary roles. I must confront the fact that the popular travel writing genre is male dominated, and its stories have often failed by misrepresenting women as one-dimensional, highly erotic, and often exotic minor characters. For example, Kerouac's narrator meets a romantic interest who he describes first as "the cutest little Mexican girl" and later, when they begin to argue, as "a dumb little Mexican wench" (51). The woman becomes part of his tourist experience. I should acknowledge that all women in my creative thesis are only presented in relation to the main character brothers. However, as a matter of both respect and good storytelling, I have attempted to represent all minor characters, no matter how brief their presence on the page, in a way that suggests they are the main characters of their own stories—like the Polish friends Elżbieta and Ewa whose own journey passes by and influences the brothers on the highway (Chapter 10). I can avoid misrepresenting women as minor characters, but I also must address the norms of masculinity in many travel novels. Masculinity in travel

is often wrapped up in notions of a quest or conquest and proving manliness through hardships or a rite of passage into manhood (C. Thompson 176). I stayed away from these notions of travel, instead grounding the purpose of the trip in *Melting Road* on a goal of adapting to life under neoliberalism, as discussed in the next part of this introduction, and a journey of familial bonding, like the brothers re-connecting and visiting their cousin (Chapter 8). My creative thesis represents a personal story of two adult brothers who have not seen each other since they were teenagers, and so my novel is an inherently masculine story, but I can deconstruct rather than perpetuate or ignore gender norms. For example, the narrator presents an awareness of the difficulty the brothers have hugging each other when they meet (Chapter 2) and then when they separate for the first time (Chapter 12). The narrator and his brother must necessarily grapple with conventions of masculinity in their interactions and presentation, and a story that shows an awareness of that aids in its deconstruction.

Although travel writing as a genre is over-represented with male stories (C. Thompson 169), there are many female writers who write within the genre (Frostrup qtd. in Maurice 81), and I turned to some for inspiration. Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, for example, helped me see the value and roles that minor characters can have when the narrator is travelling alone. The plot can hinge on each encounter with a minor character as when Strayed's narrator (46) and my narrator (Chapter 13) are hitchhiking alone. Similar to *Wild*, my novel also develops my narrator's personal vulnerability and his family-focused difficulties over the course of the journey. Both are important topics that masculine narrators often ignore. While Carl Thompson points out that scholarship has found no consistent difference between travel writing written by women and by men—and in fact looking for one can reinforce a gender binary (172)—Mary Morris makes the

point that women often do face different circumstances when travelling (qtd. in Hayward WYWH 22). In this regard, women's travel writing, representing a travel experience unlike my own, was an important part of research for my writing.

In addition to the conventionally masculine focus of the genre, another piece of heavy baggage carried by English travel writing is its colonial past. The history of English travel writing is of white Europeans travelling to colonial regions and writing back to Europe, describing those areas through the often pejorative lens of a colonizer (Burton 3). Even those English writers who were sympathetic to the people they wrote about still took part in a form of truth-making that overwrote and superseded many identities and cultures in the minds of European readers (C. Thompson 119). For example, even though Joseph Conrad is critical of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*, his depiction of the Congo River became the main vision of the region in the European imagination. The discrepancies of wealth and language that existed at that time meant that non-European peoples were “denied the power of representing themselves” by European travel writers, says Debbie Lisle (69 qtd. in C. Thompson 119). Importantly, Thompson notes that this problem does not plague all travel writing. Caryl Phillips reverses this dynamic in *The European Tribe* in which his Black Kittitian-British narrator describes travelling the European continent (C. Thompson 169). The ethical dilemma of representing the subaltern, as posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is resolved so long as the represented people have a voice that can also be heard (Spivak 283)—as with Phillips writing about Europeans. I would add that writers navigating the ethics of representation of others should also consider the dynamics of power that exist in the construction of knowledge. Are the subject peoples better or worse positioned than the writer to establish truth? Thus, this dilemma of the narrator speaking over

others exists substantially less in my novel about a Canadian from a European colony visiting and writing about European peoples—except when my narrator visits Hungary.

Budapest is a traditional European capital that was once the seat of an empire; however, it was more recently marginalized in global wealth inequality as a medium-income country. The label “second world” used by English speakers to describe former-Soviet bloc countries shows the pejorative representations Hungarians have experienced in the English world, and my narrator experiences differences of wealth when travelling in a country that has a lower median wage than Canada (Chapter 9). My narrator witnesses and joins the pub crawls of Budapest that are slowly gentrifying the city’s downtown from a residential community into a playground for youth from wealthier countries. When he realizes this, he cannot justify his participation in a foreign gentrifying industry that pushes Hungarians away from their Hungarian capital. When discussing the ethics of representing those with less opportunities than the writer herself, Sara Wheeler suggested to me in interview that one strategy is “to let people speak for themselves where possible. And to use history judiciously” (qtd. in Hayward OTC 71). This means the most respectful representation of Budapest I can give is one that is accurate to my actual encounters in the city and historically well-researched. However, history is not without its own ethical dilemmas. When discussing European travellers writing about what they pejoratively called the “Orient”, Edward Said distinguishes between “vision” and “narrative”. One of his solutions to Europe’s historical misrepresentation of others is for authors to use personal narrative that “introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness” over trying to write authoritatively and therefore inaccurately (240). It was this technique that I relied on in the streets of Budapest except when I provided a counter history of the city as learned by my narrator

(Chapter 9). Hungary's official narrative of World War Two—as depicted in its statue to the victims of the war, which shows a German eagle attacking an angel that represents Hungary—pretends that the horrors of the Holocaust were forced on the country from without (EURACTIV). In truth, the horrors were supported by Hungary's own fascist party whose sentiments the current government of Hungary now courts.

When my narrator later visits the unofficial refugee and migrant camp in Calais (Chapter 15), I had to carefully consider Spivak's question of representing the subaltern and Said's proposal of narrative over vision. The temporary residents of the Calais Jungle have stories that need to be heard by the British mainstream. Their stories are often silenced by the threat of deportation, but their stories are not mine to tell. Like my narrator, the American woman at the volunteer shelter was blocked at the UK border. They both found themselves homeless in France, but the colour of their skin and the power of their voices means that they are considered "expats" in the country. The people around them face heavier prejudices and the label of "migrants"—even though many are in fact fleeing war as refugees. To navigate this inequality in my creative thesis, I adhered as closely as possible to an accurate representation of the people in Calais. I also distanced the information through a second-hand source; my narrator is not a qualified ethnographer here. The result is that my thesis serves only as an introduction to their stories. To navigate this issue in my own career beyond my thesis, I have worked in the past with multilingual refugees to support them in telling their own stories in English (Dahir 103).

Finally, the last baggage of travel writing that I had to navigate in my thesis was the often classist distinction between travellers and tourists. According to C. Thompson, much travel writing of the 19th and 20th centuries created an elitist distinction between

the distinguished traveller—usually upper class, who journeys to explore untouched cultures—and the gaudy, gentrifying tourist—usually lower class, who holidays for pleasure and disrupts a region by exploiting local resources (122-4). This distinction is fuelled by the notion that the tourist seeks a holiday commodity that robs a place of its living culture while the traveller seeks to experience “life as it is really lived” in a place before it changes (Burton 163). The hypocrisy of travel writers who condemn tourists is that so-called travellers often seek their own imagined version of a place that no longer exists, and they have the same gentrifying effect as the tourist. At the BeWelcome party in London, my narrator shares this sentiment when he says he is seeking to “escape the pre-packaged kitsch and live, really live” (Chapter 3), but for him, under late capitalism, the ideal experience is switched. The place he is visiting in the expensive city is filled with other low-income visitors whom my narrator wants to meet. The distinction between tourist and traveller can be upended by what Maxine Feifer calls “post-tourist” travel writing at the end of the 20th century, such as in Bill Bryson’s *The Lost Continent* (qtd. in C. Thompson 126). The post-tourist narrative has “a postmodern sensibility or tendency ... to playfulness and parody” (128). C. Thompson recommends this style as one strategy to overcome the elitism in travel writing, and similarly my narrator remarking on seeking to visit the city the way “living breathing people do” is in a moment of drunken silliness. But generally I found that no such strategy was necessary. The scene in Paris at the Louvre where the narrator and Lidjia deconstruct the traveller-tourist dichotomy (Chapter 14) was a genuine experience of characters with empathy for their fellow visitors. The scenes in my creative novel add an element not covered by Feifer and Thompson’s survey. How is the relationship between tourist and traveller, often marked by wealth, further complicated when the visitors are of lower income than

the region they are touring? Are the narrator and Lidija more likely to be considered tourists or travellers when they cannot afford to enter the Louvre? In contrast to earlier works in the genre, travellers under late capitalism may now be low income, and it is the holidaying tourists staying at hotels in expensive European cities who are upper class. The students and travellers at the BeWelcome house can't afford to live in the city except three to a single bedroom. The traveller elitism begins to break down in the inequalities experienced by the vagrant travellers of late capitalism.

Part Two

Fuck Capitalism!: The Neoliberal Context

My novel has value as both representation and critique of neoliberalism. Just as Said and Wheeler found that an accurate reflection of a firsthand experience was the preferred way to represent people with less of a voice than the author, so too does accuracy have value for the political engagement of my novel with late capitalism. By neoliberalism, I mean the religion of an unfettered market that rose to prominence in the Reagan-Thatcher era. Its adherents claim to value small government, deregulated industry, and personal freedom at the expense of all other factors, but they instead maneuver into positions of government power in order to produce the greatest possible financial wealth for their oligarch allies. By late capitalism, I refer to the post-Reagan-Thatcher era in which the fallout of neoliberalism, like accelerating climate change and growing inequality, is pushing capitalism in an unsustainable direction. My novel is set in this context, after the 2008 mortgage deregulation recession and before the 2016 Brexit-Trump backlash against globalization.

A foundation of factual representation in my *roman à clef* is valuable to achieve one of the primary goals of my creative thesis as social criticism. Louis Althusser felt that more realist forms of art have a stronger critical position from which to “make us see” the ideologies “in some sense from the inside” (1478). He suggests that ideology exists in everything human and is “identical with the ‘lived’ experience of human existence itself” (1481). By using narratives that run parallel to lived events, realist stories—or what he would call “authentic” stories—have the capacity to reveal broader political ideologies than more artificial narratives that may only contain the ideology of their creators. The adherence of my novel to genuine experiences helps reveal the theses at the core of the ideologies of late capitalism as well as some of their ideological antitheses.

In this manner, my creative thesis embraces historical period in the pre-Brexit 2010s. “Always historicize!” says Fredric Jameson about the process of art critique (1937). An understanding of a text in its context will enrich our understanding of both, says Elizabeth Fox-Genovese of a New Historicist style of literary critique (217). For this reason, I will provide here some of what I see as the relevant historical, legal, and cultural context for my creative thesis. The process of historical periodization is fraught with weak generalizations and unclear transitions, but an understanding of some of the material conditions and political forces of the time will help illuminate how fallout of neoliberalism impacted personal lives in the time of my thesis novel.

The era between the 2008 global recession and 2016 Brexit vote feels the threads of both connecting in the middle. With David Cameron’s call for austerity to solve the recession, neoliberalist policies won the 2010 UK election. Austerity measures meant cutting public services and tax rates on businesses. Brits saw their employment

prospects decline with layoffs from the recession while the gutting of welfare funding could mean their housing eviction after a single missed benefits appointment. People on disability support, like Freddie in Chapter 5 of *Melting Road*, found themselves turning to squatting after losing their welfare access. Cameron's election led to university subsidies getting cut, and student marches enveloped the country when the national cap on tuition rates nearly tripled from £3,290 to £9,000 in a single school year. In 2011 in London, mass riots followed the police shooting of Mark Duggan. Led at night often by teenagers, riots swept through urban neighbourhoods, and the news speculated whether the cause was government's austerity cuts to after-school programs or the record heat waves that made the night as warm as the day (WalesOnline). In 2012, the real estate newspaper the *Evening Standard* led a tirade against European squatters and illogically accused them of stealing both job benefits and jobs. The goal of the property magnates who owned the papers was to push for the criminalization of residential squatting. In the midst of all this, while thousands of homes sat empty, London was beset by a housing crisis of climbing rental rates and inaccessible housing prices. In 2016, the Brexit vote was driven largely by resentful and xenophobic Brits who bought into the propaganda that a departure from the European Union would return their declining wages and push out the Europeans from lower-income countries who had moved to rural UK counties looking for work. Only in this midst of this decade, between the enlargement of the European Union and it's shrinking with Brexit, would the squats in London be so vibrant with European languages—as my narrator witnessed when he arrived (Chapter 2).

Back in Canada, the recession was felt unequally across the provinces, and it meant a regional slump in New Brunswick and a hiring freeze in certain industries. As

jobs were cut, communication and research work once given to Arts graduates was handed off to managers and technical workers who were asked to do two jobs instead of one. For the few positions remaining, new Arts graduates, like myself, needed unrealistic resumes to compete with experienced workers who were laid-off during the recession. The prospects for new graduates were to either build up a CV in poverty-inducing part-time contract work with no health benefits, which I did for seven years, or to accept a dead-end job in a call centre, which had such high turn-over rates they needed a new training class every three months. A friend at a call centre told me that if you could harden yourself to the first month of verbal assault on the phones, you would stand up from your office chair and realize two years had passed. Alternatively, as is common during periods of economic decline, a person looking for work could leave their region. Many artists and musicians I knew did that, heading off to work in the tar sands of Alberta.

The fallout of the 2008 recession was not capitalism failing. This was it working exactly as intended for those wealthy elite who lobbied the governments for deregulation and stimulus loans. Adjusted for inflation, the purchasing power of average wages in America hadn't increased in the previous 40 years while the nation's richest held a higher percentage of wealth than any era since the Gilded Age (Desilver). The young Generation Y, born between the early 80s and late 90s, faced a staggering decline in real wealth relative to their parents' generation. The Baby Boomers in total owned 20% of national wealth in America by median age 35, and they passed down stories of buying houses in small towns when they found work after college. The Millennial generation Y meanwhile, climbing through recession after recession and strapped with student debt, will now own less than 5% of the country's national wealth by that same

age benchmark (Ingram). A generation that was inundated with advertisements that suggested buying more merchandise was the source of happiness was also the first generation since the Great Depression to face worse financial prospects than their parents' generation (Steinberg).

My experience in this historical moment is reflected in my narrator. While working an internship in his field to build his resume, he sees that he is losing the last of his student savings and slipping into poverty. In a matter of months, he will be broke and will have to take emotion-draining call-centre work. He chooses instead to move out of his rented room, to save up, to sleep on his friends' couches, to hit the road, and to go to Europe until his money runs out. He chooses homelessness and migration before desperation strikes, but he is no less of a homeless migrant, and that may be why he is blocked at the UK border. These are the historical circumstances that produce my narrator as a vagrant traveller with money saved for a ticket out and little else. When he arrives in London, he finds others, like himself, trying to find purpose and meaningful pursuits in post-recession late capitalism. My creative thesis reflects this context, capturing the tension of this era pulled taut between the empty expectations of advertising and rising inequality.

The consecutive neoliberal and conservative governments in the lead up to this era also continued to wage Richard Nixon's war on drugs. Strengthening police forces against personal use of drugs seemingly went against their stated objectives of small government, deregulation, and personal freedom, but anti-drug hysteria, often fuelled by misinformation, allowed political parties both to win over socially conservative voters and criminalize the drug-use of their activist opponents (Hayward TGI, 2014). Illicit substances have been frequently featured in travel writing that explores the fringes of

society. Hemingway's celebration of drinking in Europe *The Sun Also Rises* was published in America during alcohol prohibition. William S. Burroughs's narrator consumes cannabis edibles in Tangier in *Naked Lunch*. These substances have remained the same, but the role of drugs in society, as measured by various national and state laws, is now developing rapidly. Twenty years ago, harsh restrictions such as "Schedule I" or "Class A" substances jailed users of marijuana and LSD in almost every country around the world. The systemic racism inherent in these laws cannot go unmentioned. While White people in Britain use drugs at higher rates per capita, Black people face more frequent police searches and therefore more legal consequences for drug use (Eastwood, Shiner, and Bear) as my narrator learns (Chapter 2). For this reason among many, drug decriminalization is an ongoing issue of racial justice as well as criminal justice. A realist representation of the drug use in my creative thesis can also contribute to ongoing discussions of legalization and prohibition surrounding so-called recreational drugs.

In 2001, Portugal decriminalized small amounts of all drugs and recognized their use as a personal health issue. In 2019, following various American states, Canada legalized recreational Marijuana. In 2020, Oregon state, like Portugal, decriminalized small amounts of all drugs. During this last decade, regulations on academic study of illicit substances have been slowly lifted, allowing universities and medical clinics to resume their examination of recreational substances for medicinal benefits. A survey of such research is beyond the scope of this thesis, but early results point to what some users have believed all along. Drugs like THC in marijuana and psilocybin in magic mushrooms are low-risk substances that have the potential to help treat mental illnesses such as addiction and depression. In Paris, the narrator meets characters who self-

medicate with the THC in hash, which matches his own experiences (Chapter 14). Use of these substances is higher among people with mental illness (NBER), suggesting that their use has not always been recreational and may often be a form of self-medicating by individuals who cannot afford expensive private health insurance, like my narrator.

Stories inspired by true events have an important place in this discussion of substances and mental illness. Natalie Roxburgh has written on the appearance of mind-altering substances in modern novels and contemporary fiction and memoir. She argues that alongside growing research surrounding substances and the brain in the past decades, there has been a “cognitive turn” in creative writing that includes “the contemporary ‘neuronovel’, or fiction that has concerned itself with the material brain” (2). Importantly, she finds that the experiential dimension of mind-altering substances is valuable in these literary works because of their ability to help us communicate about mental experiences (33). Similarly, despite recent advances in psychiatry, Linda Fisher argues it is still necessary to give a voice to those who suffer illness in order to bring to light the subjective, experiential dimensions of illness, which are often ignored by biomedical knowledge. She says that the awareness-creating and knowledge-advancing potential of an illness narrative depends on its realism (40). In an analysis of memoirs as counter-stories for mental illness, Abigail Gosselin suggests that fiction sometimes fails to depict mental illnesses like addiction in helpful ways because stories can simplify the illness into a convenient arc of conflict and solution for the sake of narrative resolution (137). My creative work is structured around a simple arc, but not one that is based around the mental illnesses and addictions of the central characters. These issues exist in the background in a more rounded and representative way. Addiction and depression are illnesses that are often present but subtle or unspoken. After Lyle brings up his

experience with alcohol addiction (Chapter 5), the narrator's experience while drinking is cast in a new light. Depression, which strikes when my narrator finds himself stranded in Dunkerque (Chapter 13) lingers through to Paris (Chapter 14). The narrator must persevere in that moment, but the illness is not overcome. Gosselin emphasizes that no single story should seek to establish a dominant paradigm for such experiences but should function to contribute to an ongoing dialogue and awareness of these difficulties. This is what my naturalistic representation of drug use and mental illness aims to achieve.

The problems of neoliberalism, of finding a meaningful career, or of cultural alienation for self-medication of a mental illness are not new. Despite the developments of my novel's historical period, my narrator and his cohort inherited anti-establishment rhetoric from past generations that remains popular. These sentiments are conveyed to him by people he meets in squats in London and others he meets on the road, like the man who hums when he walks (Chapter 13) and Jesus on the beach in Spain (Chapter 16). Some of their ideas reflect what McCann and Szalay have called the "magical" solutions of the New Left that rose out of the 1960s (443). The principle of the New Left says that "providing 'alternative definitions of reality'" is the most politically subversive of acts (C. Wright Mills qtd. in McCann and Szalay 441). This sentiment survives today. Consider the following meme posted in an online witches' community on 12 January 2021 (see fig. 1). It garnered the most social media reactions (over 3,000 likes and shares) of all the posts made that day by the same page.

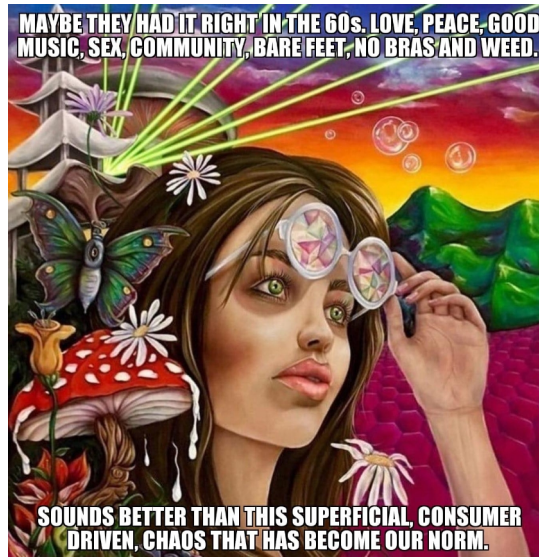


Figure 1: Anti-Consumer Meme: “Maybe they had it right in the 60s. Love, peace, good music, sex, community, bare feet, no bras, and weed. / Sounds better than this superficial consumer driven chaos that has become our norm.”

Whether protesting the Vietnam War in the 1960s or demonstrating against the World Trade Organization in the 1990s, anti-establishment movements in these eras fell short of political transformation. Faced with immovably large political forces and the failure of activism to make substantial change, anti-establishment movements began to limit their revolution to the personal sphere where one has control and where individual liberty can be found. My narrator faces this question of self-revolution posed by the anarchic commune at the climax of my novel. If participation in neoliberalism contributes to climate disaster, is withdrawing from late capitalism a sufficiently revolutionary act? In reflection on all the events of the novel, my narrator ultimately agrees with McCann and Szalay’s rejection of the magical thinking of the New Left.

Neoliberalism insists on personal freedom. Any person, like my narrator, like the man who hums as he walks along the roads of France, is free to drop out under neoliberalism. Did Alexander Supertramp, enraged at his parent’s conformity, achieve

anything other than a personal holiday when he escaped *Into the Wild* of Alaska? (Krakuer). These people are no threat to the neoliberal order, but the neoliberal order, as my narrator discovers in the hottest summer on record, is still a threat to them.

The question is not whether a person should drop out of neoliberalism. The question is instead whether a person is doing what they can to challenge the fundamental assumptions and structures of neoliberalism. In answer to the question I raised from Dobson in the opening of this critical introduction, I do feel that it is often necessary that an artist, poet, or writer work within the exploitative system of neoliberalism, but the reason is not simply to be able to make a career out of being a writer. As my narrator discovers, it is possible to reject neoliberalism fully and still find a place for oneself in the world, but neoliberalism would continue driving up inequality and global temperatures. And if I had wanted to fully reject neoliberalism and still write *Fuck Capitalism* on the side of a bus, as Dobson proposes, a can of spray paint is an easy item to shoplift. My narrator met many characters who did this. No, the reason to participate in neoliberalism is in order to challenge it more effectively. The reason is to produce a work of fiction that the forces of neoliberalism itself will value spreading.

Into the stratified banquet of late capitalism, I offer this creative thesis: my own shiny, red apple of anarchic discord.

Melting Road

a novel

by

Benjamin Hayward

Prologue

Leo held the blue butane flame off the neck of the makeshift liquor-bottle pipe in front of my mouth.

“Ready?” he croaked. It was the only words I ever heard him speak.

I looked from him back to the brown glass mouthpiece. I inhaled. The flame knuckled toward me. I drew the hot fumes deep into my body.

A chemical taste, oiled rubber, caught in the tip of my lungs. I coughed, and white smoke came shuddering out.

Starting in my throat, the world began to shake. My cough could not stop, and it echoed out in both sound sound sound and sensation, quickening, until its repetitions became the bzzzzzzzz of a machine scraping its way out of my mouth. I was gagging and drooling the smoke. Someone offered me water. I motioned it away. I would choke.

The drug came on so hard that I couldn't keep my eyes open. Pure colours as vibrant as 16-bit illustrations filled the blackness. Their forms duplicated and made cascading contrails that buzzed like a crashing computer. I was convulsing below my jaw. I opened my eyes, and I was vomiting stir fry onto my own lap in bright colours. It looked like it was spewing out of me in spring-loaded streamers. Someone was taking me to the bathroom where I shut my eyes against the floor. They were on the phone now calling an ambulance. I couldn't open my eyes in the intensity of the colours. The echoing sounds were pierced by an ambulance siren. Paramedics were in the room next, and they were removing me on a stretcher. I was still vomiting I-don't-know-what. They shut the doors to the ambulance. Thud. I opened my eyes.

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor in Leo's bedroom. Everyone was looking at me. My glasses had fallen off. I picked them up. They were broken. I put them on. No they weren't. There were no paramedics. The ambulance was never called. I tried to say I was sorry. I couldn't make the words. There was vomit on my shirt. I touched it. It wasn't wet. It wasn't there, and it disappeared with the rest of the colours.

My heart rate softened in my chest. I had drool on my chin. That was all.

"How was it?" asked my brother, sitting next to Leo.

Somewhere between my brain and my tongue, I had difficulty making words. I gave up on trying to say sorry and just said, "Thank you."

Chapter 1

The room was an echo of the night before: cheap streamers draped over the stained chair under a grey skylight, silent.

Searching, I reached for the coffee table. Five empty beer bottles, a half empty pint glass, a rainbow-kitten coffee mug, paint brushes jammed inside, spilled popcorn, a misshapen ceramic ashtray made by Haley's boyfriend, their curvy glass bong, the two retro game controllers, a yellow plastic toy pickup truck with a lighter in its back, and my glasses, perched on the corner closest to the futon.

No one else was awake yet. I was alone with the ringing of the party in my ears. Friends sitting cross-legged around the table, standing in the entryway under the slanted ceiling. Coleby stoned and stepping cowboy-like over Jill to paint on my face and spilling some of his ten percent beer on the carpet. Ten percent, like the unemployment rate in New Brunswick, I joked when Coleby and I toasted cans. All come to see me off. My going away party. All drunk on shared parting gifts. I couldn't take the beer or the whisky with me. I was going to Europe to see my brother.

"Ah, hungover!" Sal yelled from her room, exaggerated, quoting a bleary-eyed cartoon character.

In the kitchen, I deposited beer bottles into the sink and got down Sal's coffee.

"Wanna share a bowl?" she asked, reaching to crack open her bedroom door, still not standing upright. "It's the last of the weed my Dad grew." She had told me her summer was going to be boring without me. Who would get drunk and crash craft-nights with her? That was about as sentimental as she got.

I picked a piece of popcorn off the counter and put it in my mouth. “Nah. I have to leave to hitchhike.” I didn’t want to be stoned in a stranger’s car. The hitch to my mom’s place was 200km. She would drive me to the airport tomorrow.

My bag was already packed. I’d been living out of a backpack for two months. Beyond essentials, I had only my small laptop for typing work, my half-full pocket journal with an empty spare, two pens wrapped in rubber bands so they wouldn’t fall out of my pocket, a lighter, and a green pebble from Sal’s plant that she insisted I take to remember her by.

I just had to check my bag’s pockets for things better left at Sal’s: spare baggies with weed crumbs or a business card with the corner torn out to roll a joint. I flipped through every page and receipt in my notebook checking there were no half-smoked roaches squished between pages for border guards to find. I had better leave the lighter behind. Who carries a lighter and no cigarettes?

“Are you nervous?” Sal asked, pouring us coffee. “Will you be OK?” Both of us had visited America. We didn’t need passports when we were young. But neither of us had flown overseas.

“Yeah.” When I was stoned, I told her I imagined astronauts getting ready. They’re putting on boots that they will float in for the first time in their lives. Their choices and safety are in their own hands above the earth. “They go off into the unknown, you know? I’m only going to London—Europe.” Millions of people go about their lives there everyday, I told myself. “Plus I’m going to stay with my brother. I’ll be OK.”

Sal sat down on the futon next to me and tucked up her legs. She was still wearing the over-sized men's t-shirt that she slept in. It was her own brother's old shirt. "What if you get in a fight with him?" she asked.

I hadn't lived with Tim since I was a teenager and he let me stay at his place in Toronto for a summer. He was my older half-brother, but we grew up together, and he moved out of our mom's place when I was 15. That summer I went to visit him, we got in a fight over something stupid. Board game rules, I think. It dragged into a week, and I had to take the bus home a month early. That was seven or eight years ago. I last saw him three years ago when he was home from London for Christmas. We stayed in touch online now. I had told Sal all about him. She was an older sibling and grew up close with her brother too. "You're going to have an awesome time with him," she had said, jealous but drunk.

"We'll work it out any issues," I committed. "Besides, if I have to stay in a hostel in London, I'll be broke in about a week and need to fly right back."

"Does *he* have a place to stay yet?" She had heard stories of him squatting in London, staying and partying in abandoned buildings until the next eviction comes.

I opened my laptop to check for an update. Three new messages from Timothy. My brother.

you ready? he asked last night, and then he followed it with a link to an article:

Hottest Summer on Record Predicted For Europe

The last message came early this morning. It was longer. I read it out loud to Sal. *when you get in, go to Barbican stn and find Newbury st and the building with the red door. don't worry, it looks like a squat. knock and ask for Niko. There is a very small chance i will be arrested that morning before you arrive... if i am not there call*

Zuzanna at +44-----, she will take care of you. Delete this message in case they check your computer at the border.

Sal responded with her widest eyes while sipping from her coffee. “What if you *do* have to fly back right away?”

It would be a huge waste of the student loan savings I had left if I flew to London for nothing and had to fly right back. I’d be broke and in need of a job—whatever I could find that actually paid full-time wages, probably a call centre. I didn’t answer her.

Sal held her mug in both her hands. We hadn’t turned on the light and were lit as much by my small laptop screen as the muted skylights in her windowless living room. “What if you get in a fight with him, or if he’s arrested, and you have to pay for a hostel? What if you’re there with nobody and you’re just, you know, depressed the same in London as here?” She set down her cup. “You sure you want to go?”

“You think I want to miss the *hottest summer on record*?” I tried to change the subject with a joke. She didn’t laugh. “I want to see my brother, you know? I want to travel until my money runs out. I want to be able to lay down after it all with a smile on my face and say, *I did it.*”

Sal smiled for a moment too. “What if you change while you’re gone?”

There was more than one way to interpret her question. I should have asked what she meant. I heard her roommates waking up in the next room, and I stood up to test the weight of my bag on my shoulders. “I hope that I do,” I replied.

She looked up at my large hiking backpack with its snacks and water bottle, sleeping bag and bedroll all tucked inside. “You have to write to me about all of your and your brother’s crazy adventures,” she said.

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I hitched two rides to get to my mom's. The excitement took over once I was on the road and the sun was out. I danced while waiting for cars, tried to sing. It's easier to get picked up when you look like you're having fun. I was no expert at hitchhiking, but I had practise going back and forth between my university city and my parents' two places in the next city. The bus took three hours with all the small-town stops and cost nearly \$40, which was an extra four hours work for me on my Canadian minimum wage. I could usually hitch it in the same three hours.

I told a retired French Canadian couple who drove me from Oromocto to Moncton all about my haphazard plans, about quitting my part-time magazine job, which paid so little I was draining the last of my student savings just to keep it, and about my brother squatting in London—or what I knew about it, which was basically nothing, other than he lived rent free in abandoned buildings. I didn't tell them about the risk of getting arrested.

I didn't tell our mother either. She said she was worried about Tim, but less worried now that I'd be going to see him.

"You're not worried about me?" I asked when she dropped me at the airport the next day.

That wasn't fair to ask, she said. Tim was a hemophiliac. I learned what that meant from a young age. He had to be more careful than me. A concussion could kill him without his recom injection. "Plus you'll take care of each other," she said, and kissed me goodbye. "See you in a couple of months."

“We’ll see,” I taunted as I released our hug. “I’m going to stay as long as I can.”

My brother gave me clear advice not to tell the border guards in Gatwick that, but I’d never had any problems at borders before, or with airport security. Either way, I wore my only collared shirt, one of four tshirts I was bringing, to the airport. Better to be careful. I buttoned it up and put my hair in a ponytail.

I didn’t feel I looked like myself when flight security checked my face against my passport and placed my bag on the conveyor. This wasn’t the guy who had been sleeping on Sal’s futon.

I watched the x-ray as they paused it on my backpack. Anything in those blue or orange skeleton lines could be something I missed. The officer pushed the button for the next bag and then stood up. I watched as he pulled mine off the belt.

He opened its top pouch and dug around. My spare notebook, my granola bars. He pulled out Sal’s green potted plant stone. “What’s this?”

“Um,” I felt as awkward as he did. “A pebble.”

He put it back and waved me through.

My redeye landed at 6am in London, and the line to border control shifted like sleepy shoppers toward the row of brisk guards dividing passengers into pass and wait columns. Along every line were signs stating no recording by camera or any other device.

My turn led me to a smiling, middle-aged blonde officer. Her British accent sounded like a film character to my Canadian ears.

“How long will you be staying in the UK, and what is the purpose of your trip?”

I told her I just finished school—though really it was last autumn—and I was going to visit my brother in London and travel around Europe. A little bit of a Eurotrip

after graduation, I said, before I have to get a real job. I told her I would be staying in London only six weeks until my brother and I took the bus to go visit our cousin in Budapest. That part could have been true. Our cousin lived with his wife and sons there. My brother and I talked about visiting them, but I bought the bus tickets on the cheapest date just to have onward plans to show at the border.

“How are you paying for your trip?”

I told her I had student savings, which was true. I passed her a photocopied bank statement with \$1,600 printed on it. I told her I would still be working a couple hours a week online for a magazine in Canada in order to top up my money, which might have been true, I didn't know yet, and I said I had an empty credit card for emergencies. I wanted to make it sound like I could take care of myself. But I told her I didn't need much money because I would be staying with my brother. I gave her his phone number and an old address from when he was a student.

“And he's OK with you staying with him?”

“He invited me,” I stammered. I was unprepared for this question. “He's only two years older than me, and, you know, we're family.”

She spent a moment typing this up. If she asked about my return flight, I was prepared to tell her that I hadn't bought it yet because I didn't know whether I would be flying back from Budapest or from London and I would purchase it on my credit card when the time came.

“Welcome to England.” She handed me back my passport and winked. “Don't get into any trouble.”

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I was through the border. I had everything I would need for the next month—or year even—in my backpack. Its straps somehow felt lighter on my shoulders than when I first put it on in Sal’s living room. I felt like I stood at the top of a blank canvas and the continent was wide open before me. I just needed to find my brother.

I had looked up online that the best way to hitchhike out of Gatwick airport was to ask at the walk to the parking garage. All I needed was a 30km lift to a metro station on the outskirts of the city, and I could take public transport from there to the squat at Barbican station. In Canada, I had always stood on the side of the road with my thumb out. Here, I would have to ask.

I let the first family with matching suitcases pass me by. Their car was probably full, I told myself. Then two older men with tans passed. I should have asked them, but maybe their car was a two seater? Whoever was next, I would ask. A family with one son. Perfect.

“Excuse me...” I explained my route, and the pasty-faced British dad earnestly gave me instructions to catch the commuter bus. I had already looked up the price online and decided against it. The next group were three excited Polish men surprised when I stopped them. Their truck was full, they said, but they wished me luck. The next driver wasn’t going to London, she said.

That’s how hitchhiking was on the side of the road too. Any car that passed could be the one. Most were not. It could be your tenth or your hundred-and-tenth. It could take ten minutes or it could take ten hours, but eventually, always, someone friendly would be going your way with a spot in their car.

It took an hour before I got a ride. An athlete with bright lipstick and straightened hair walking with a man in a too-tight button-up shirt agreed to take me into the city. She got in the front to drive, and he helped pass my large bag through to the back of her small two-door. I thought they were a couple, but he was an American flying in, and they were both trainers for MMA fighters. She was picking him up to go to the same convention. His accent was familiar. He was from New York. But hers was as dizzying as the quick turns she took weaving through village streets to beat the rush-hour traffic. I was going to London.

It's always exhilarating hurtling forward at machine-powered miles per hour after standing, staring at the same unmoving pavement, hoping for a ride, but this was even better. I'd never been on roads with white lines instead of yellow. I'd never driven so fast past houses so close I could almost touch their bricks from the window. In Canada, trees that hung down to brush passing cars were only on dirt backroads. Here we were driving full speed on smooth asphalt. It was stranger than being high.

I had directions to find Barbican and Newbury Street from any subway line. When I came out onto the street near Barbican station, I was amid tall office blocks on Goswell Road. The morning city had the smell of a cold wind in June: diesel and rubber and steel. One of London's tall red buses passed, and tiny boxy cars and vans followed. Which way was north? Up the street or down? Suits and windbreakers passed me. Clicking dress shoes and soft high heels hit the pavement. Was Newbury somewhere left or right? My brother said to find a bus shelter. They all have maps. The dark red overhang of a bus stop stood out like a flag. A two-headed camera guarded it above. I oriented the map by picturing it spinning upside down. There was the road to Newbury Street.

What did a squat even look like? The streets got smaller and quieter with each twist away from the station. I took the last turn past an open pub with tables pressed to its sidewalk windows. Loosened ties and crossed legs with shiny shoes sat for business brunch with pints of beer. Their conversations and clinking plates stayed behind with the bar window. The street the squat was supposed to be on was a short empty lane and two narrow sidewalks between five-floor post-war office buildings. Which building was it? On a black brick wall beside me was an entryway with a large, red wooden door. The lower windows were boarded up.

A car pulled onto the street. Its wheels jostled the cobblestones of the crosswalk. A police car with inverse colours approached. The second officer was staring at the lit screen of a laptop. The car rolled by without stopping.

I looked up at the building with the red door. Someone had just moved away from an upper window where a banner hung. It read ACAB, stained by hand, and had a lightning bolt *N* across a circle. Green and white water lilies were painted up one of the brick columns toward the window. A small white paper—*Section 6*, it said—was taped to the red door. In legalese, it proclaimed the building a squat.

I knocked.

Chapter 2

My first day in London was a whirlwind of tobacco spliffs, musty squats, and gold cans of Polish beer. I didn't have to ask for Tim at the door of the squat. He opened it with his arms wide for a hug. We only hugged at hellos and goodbyes, and he reminded me by pulling the hug into a headlock. He found it difficult now that I was five inches taller than him.

Tim's hair was a long brown tangle with something bright tied in it. His beard was whiskery but long. He had just come back from camping on a Greek island beach for three weeks. He had a tan beneath the V collar of his sweatshirt, and the blond streaks in his beard and hair were brighter than my dirty blond hair.

"You look like a caveman," I said.

"Shut up."

"What happened to your glasses?"

"Yeah," he laughed as he led me inside. "I can barely see." He showed me a broken red pair that had only one arm. He lost his glasses last winter, he told me. A grocery store security guard who was wrestling with him pulled them off his face when Tim wouldn't let go of a bottle of vodka. But he found this pair with one arm on the beach in Greece, and they were basically his prescription, he said.

"You shouldn't be wrestling. You're a hemophiliac."

"I know. I told the guard that, and he grabbed my glasses."

Tim put the thin red frames on, and they made him look like a neanderthal hired as a typist.

“They look good on you.”

“Thanks.”

He shut the heavy door, darkening the lower floor. My vision went out with the light of the street. Around me was silence and a clutter of bicycles filling a wide hall. I heard metal bolts clank shut.

“If you need to get out or let someone in, here are the latches at the top and bottom of the door,” Tim showed me. “You always need someone to let you out so they can lock up from the inside.”

“What’s the story with this place? What’s a Section 6?”

“Yeah, it’s a squat. There’s some people I want you to meet.” He moved like he had already drank three coffees or run a race that morning. He was excited to have me there.

He led through the darkness toward a heavy door with a small wire window that I could see in the gloom. On the other side, a column of concrete stairs with the tiles removed climbed back and forth up through the floors to a skylight high above. An extension cord followed the banister upward.

As he bounded up, I asked him. “Why were you going to be arrested this morning?”

“Oh. Eviction resistance for Bertie’s squat. It was nothing. It went fine. The bailiffs never came.” He wanted to give me Zuzanna’s number just in case. “She’s someone I want to introduce you to. She was just in Greece with me, and we squatted together at Chalk Farm last year.”

I pictured them huddling together in a leaky country farm somewhere north of London, but that wasn't what he meant. Chalk Farm was a trendy district in Camden. They had lived in a squat there.

This squat was a shell. Plaster had been torn out in an abandoned renovation leaving behind old pipes and rough concrete that smelled like it was drinking up the dampness of London. Each floor beyond the central stairwell was open right to the brick outer wall. The squatters had built shanty dividers made of pallets, doors, blankets, and plastic separating the areas into unique bedrooms—some more insulated and soundproof than others. It was like they built children's forts to camp indoors. Someone had painted the stairwell with the same white lilies as outside. The building was theirs.

Tim led me to the third floor.

"Do I get to make a room here?" I asked

"This is Zuzanna's place with her crew. We can stay a couple nights, but we have to find our own squat."

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Zuzanna was almost as tall as my brother and just as tanned after their time in Greece. Her hair was as blond as if it were the end of summer. She had come to London after art school in Poland to work and paint. She ended up squatting in order work less and make more art. She wore light, feminine colours, her hair tied up, and no makeup. She leapt up from the square coffee table on her room's floor to embrace me. "Tim told me all about you in Greece. I was so jealous because my sister would never come stay in a squat with me."

This was hers and another girl's room. Their beds were below make-shift tents hanging from the twelve-foot ceilings. In between, friends of Tim's and Zuzanna's kneeled or sat cross-legged on cushions around a coffee table under a high window.

I joined them on the floor beside Tim. In the centre, the square table had a depression, and it was cluttered with ashed-in beer cans, candle wax over wine bottles, cigarette rolling papers, used mugs and glasses, no two the same, a mostly empty bottle of vodka, and a plastic toy cat from a fastfood meal. "I'm sorry I don't have any chairs," Zuzanna said.

My brother reached into his bag for a plastic ring of six white and gold cans. "Welcome to London!" he said, and handed the beers around.

"You got him Polish beers to welcome him to London?" Zuzanna was aghast.

"Hey, they're the best in the shop," said a man with an Eastern European accent. He was wearing a jean jacket and his pant leg was clipped up with cyclist's reflectors.

Zuzanna and two of her squatmates—Iwan and Jakub, who had just spoken—were Polish. "Welcome to London," he said and shook my hand.

Zuzanna made the introductions for her friends. Her and Iwan were from the same university area near Poznan. Iwan wore name-brand tracksuits even though they were a little stained. He worked full time at a street survey job, counting cars, literally, for civil engineering research. He had difficulty with English if we spoke too quickly. Jakub in the jean jacket had squatted the longest there, and he worked only sometimes as a bike courier using an app on a high-end phone that cost over \$1,000. A hundred hours salary for me. He preyed on the select hours that businesses paid an entire day's wage for a single envelope to be cycled across central London in under thirty minutes. I raised

my can to his ingenuity. “Yah, but what happens once every squatter in central London gets a phone like this?” he replied, tapping it. “There’ll be too much competition.”

I also met Lidija, from Latvia, who had the tent next to Zuzanna’s. Lidija was a fine arts student with over-sized clothes. While we sat around the table, she came and went like a small cat in a much larger cat’s body, whispering to Iwan in broken Russian.

Niko, a thin boy from Vienna with a half shaved head and arm tattoos, stayed in a room he built on the same floor as Zuzanna’s. He corrected me twice for saying his pronouns wrong before I got it.

We were also joined by two brothers from Spain who had a room downstairs. They wore black punk t-shirts and wrist bands. The younger one had thick black dreadlocks. They spoke to each other quietly in Spanish and raised their cans in a toast with my brother and I. “Brothers!” the older one said. They were what I imagined squatters looked like.

By the end of introductions, I’d already forgotten some of their names, but clinking cans of Polish beer felt like a greeting that was formal enough.

“And you, Ed, what will you do in London?” Jakub asked me, leaning back away from the table with his legs out. He had a torn, unlit cigarette in his mouth and was preparing a hash spliff for the table, warming up tiny strands of the brown stone in his hands to roll into the tobacco.

“I still have to figure that out,” I said, looking at my brother. “Have some fun— not spend too much money. Maybe go hitchhiking around Europe this summer.” I didn’t come to *do* any one thing, I thought. I came to do this, make new friends around a table, have new experiences.

“You’re in good hands with this brother,” Jakub told me, raising his eyes to Tim. “He knows how to drink your beer and not spend too much money.”

“Hey—” interrupted Tim with a laugh, “you’re drinking the beer I bought right now.”

“And I will roll the spliff,” said Jakub.

The smoke from the tobacco joint rose thick and opaque, lit up by the large window. The view was a grim alleyway between the squat and an office next door. My brother took a couple puffs. He was telling Zuzanna about the gathering at Bertie’s squat that morning. He breathed the smoke upwards from his bottom lip, and passed the spliff to me. “Do you want some?”

I’d never smoked hash before. I was not a tobacco smoker. But in Canada I had once rolled a three gram joint of weed for a 4/20 party. I took the smoke cautiously into my lungs and passed the spliff on. I coughed into my fist, and the cough kept coming. I wasn’t used to cigarettes, and this was unfiltered. I drank from my beer to stop coughing and then coughed into the can. The lightheadedness from the tobacco hit harder than that little bit of hash.

“You will be a Londoner soon enough, Eddie,” Jakub said to me as I coughed. He was already rolling another. He wasn’t expecting the spliff to make the circle twice. The unfiltered tobacco stung my eyes and filled the air with haze, but the bit of buzz I got from the THC in the hash was sharp and present.

Our conversation flowed around the table like the spliff and the tap of our beer cans. “Cheers,” my brother said not to the whole group, but just to one person at a time, when he was seeing them, and reached out to meet their can with his. In Polish, they say *na zdrowie* instead of cheers. In Russian, it was similar: *za zdaróvye*. In Spanish, *salud*.

And in German, *prost*, which was how I learned Niko was from Austria. Not just in cheers, but in side conversations and cross-table shouts, five languages were spoken at that table.

The early-June sun was nowhere to be seen outside. The stone floor of the squat was cool, but it kept us dry from the dampness on the streets. The hash stuck a smile to my face and eased my mind. I imagined looking into this room through the windows from the office building across the alley.

This was London. A part of London. Six countries, no Brits, drinking at the same table. Five languages without translation—except occasionally. Our laughter and drinks translated the rest. Here was this unseen island of cheer on stained cushions in a neglected building amid office blocks filled with expensive clothes filled with people. Here lived the Polish bike courier, who delivered their parcels, and the traffic counter, who helped plan their roads. Here lived the artists who would display in their galleries, I imagined, where visitors would sip wine, and nod, and say, “How freeing,” I thought, and they would be talking about this.

After we finished the beer, Zuzanna broke out a backup bottle of vodka and poured it for us with water and a lemon she cut. Some of them, my brother included, turned down the water.

“What’s your plan?” Jakub asked my brother and me.

“I don’t know,” Tim responded. “We might open our own squat.”

Jakub laughed. “I meant for tonight—for Zuzanna’s going away party.”

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My first night in London was Zuzanna's last.

"I will see you again, I hope," she told me, "later this summer."

"Someone is always coming and going in London," said Jakub. "Why are you taking the train to Poland? You know they have invented airplanes now?" She and Tim and had taken the train from Greece too.

"Come on," she said, and joke-kicked him sitting on the ground. "The train is nice!"

"Zuzanna is an activist," Iwan said. It sounded like he was using the word to practise his English. "You just get back, and then you're leaving again," he said, giving her a hug. He wasn't going to come out with us because he had work tomorrow.

"I know," Zuzanna replied. "I need to get away from London for a bit more," she said. The rest of their conversation was in Polish. Zuzanna was going back home for the summer to see her family, to paint some more at her grandfather's farm, and to put up some of her old paintings for sale online. When they finished she turned to the rest of us. "Let's buy some hash and go dancing!"

Jakub didn't have hash to spare.

"I have K," Niko offered from the doorway in his quiet Viennese accent, and then he spelled it out for me: "Keta-min."

"We're not doing ketamine, Niko," my brother responded from across the room. "Every time I just end up lying down and staring at the floor."

"That's because you take too much!" Niko defended his favourite drug.

"Who's fault is that, Niko?" Tim glared at him with a half smile.

"It's not my fault if you can't handle a little bump of K, right?"

“No ketamine,” Zuzanna pronounced for both of them. “We’ll find someone selling hash. Or Bertie will have some.” Zuzanna picked up her phone. Bertie, a friend from Tim and Zuzanna’s last squat together, would be meeting up with us later. He texted that he had none.

“Let’s go out,” my brother said. “Pack as little as you need for the night,” he added to me. He meant a small enough bag for a bar, if that’s where the night took us, and enough if we had to crash somewhere afterwards. “Let’s go find something to smoke.”

Tim, Zuzanna, and I left with promises to meet up with some of the others again. Lidija stayed in because she had work to do for her upcoming graduation art show. She said she’d sleep in Iwan’s room in case we wanted to come back late. Niko next door would be awake anyway. I wasn’t sure who at the Barbican squat were close friends and who were only acquaintances, but it didn’t seem to matter.

Tim passed Zuzanna and me another beer for the road. “Let me show you this squat nearby,” Tim said. Drinking on the street was legal in most places there, but I had a habit of hiding the can in my sleeve as I walked. As we walked down the street in front of the squat, Tim held his can by his chest like he was talking to us at a party.

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Our first destination was an activist squat. It had been opened by a small crew specifically for two weeks of workshops and activities to raise awareness for Palestinian liberation. It was a narrow office building from the 1970s crowded between old law offices and advertising firms on Gray’s Inn Road near Chancery Lane. The building was

around the same height as the Barbican squat but in much better shape. The owners were waiting to buy the neighbouring building to demolish them both and put in a new construction, and they were letting this one sit empty.

“Why are they advocating for Palestine in London?” I asked.

“The UK government was the one that cut the country in half,” Tim responded.

The front windows of the squat were boarded up with fresh plywood that was now decorated with a hanging Palestinian flag. The door was manned by a young British woman with glasses and a punk-looking Australian guy with a partially shaved head and green hair who Tim knew. The squatters had posted signs out front, including a Section 6. They were offering free lunch in the basement kitchen and running talks from academics and Palestinian activists upstairs. The squat was somehow open to the public for events, but they still watched the door to prevent the building’s owners from entering.

We had to finish our beers on the street before going in. This was a dry squat, Tim explained.

Artas, another friend of Tim’s, gave us a small tour to the food in the basement. He had one leg of his water-proof pants clipped up for cycling.

The squat was opened and managed by experienced squatters, and the events were run by university kids who went home to their crowded flats in the evenings. A couple of the people there seemed to bridge the two social groups, and the upper floor was set up with mattresses for whoever, student or squatter, crashed overnight to watch the building.

Lunch was a large pot of warm rice and a giant bag of individually wrapped take-away sushi, seaweed sandwich rolls, and preset platters. “Was this donated?” I asked Artas.

“No. I picked that up last night when they closed,” he replied in a Northern European accent I couldn’t place. “It was for sale yesterday, and they toss it all out at nine o’clock. So I took it off the street, and I put it in the fridge.” He was surprised no one else was doing it.

I looked at yesterday’s sushi skeptically and picked up a tray with rice-wrapped avocado and packets of pickled ginger and soy sauce. I hadn’t eaten anything but granola since the airplane, and I had the munchies from the hash. I wasn’t a fan of sushi to start. I had never even been served raw fish in New Brunswick before. But that afternoon, I became a fan of sushi. So salty, tangy, and savoury.

“I’m going to miss this about London,” said Zuzanna, wiping soy sauce from her chin.

“Could we stay here?” I asked Tim. “On the mattresses upstairs?”

“Yeah, but it’s a dry squat,” he said like it should be obvious what he preferred, “No drinks allowed.”

We waited there to meet up with Zuzanna’s and Tim’s former squatmate, Bertie.

All in clean black and a blazer for the chilly day, Bertie didn’t dress like I had imagined squatters did. He talked so deliberately when he was introduced to me. I couldn’t place his accent, but he was British. “One of Tim’s friends is finally from England,” I laughed.

“Scotland,” he said, and I don’t know whether I had made him or me more embarrassed. I wasn’t yet able to pick up on any of the regional or class dialects.

“Let’s go,” declared my brother. On the sidewalk, Tim explained that he bought a gram of MDMA from someone there. We could split the cost.

MDMA? “Who? Artas?”

He scolded me from naming people. “Security culture,” he said.

“Just say *our mutual friend*,” instructed Bertie.

“Bloody hell, MDMA?” Zuzanna asked. I thought *bloody hell* sounded funny in her Polish accent. “This is going to be a crazy night.”

“And I know where we can get some hash,” said Bertie.

We picked up cans of beer and cider from the off-license and sat in a fenced-off park until the place Bertie knew opened. This too was part of my tour of London, Tim explained. I listened while Zuzanna, Bertie, and Tim reminisced about their first squat together. One of their old squatmates was renting now.

“We might go and get tattoos from her,” Tim told me with both his eyebrows raised.

I was thinking about the squat, and I couldn’t tell if he was joking. “How do squats like Barbican get their electricity?” I asked.

“You call the lecky company,” Bertie replied.

“Most squatters just throw away the bill,” Zuzanna laughed. “In Poland, they would shut you off.”

Zuzanna included me in the conversation when she could like I was a brother to her as well. Bertie was friendly but distant.

The hashbar Bertie took us to, which I was certain was illegal in London, was up a narrow staircase and behind a locked gate with a teller’s window. They knew Bertie, but he didn’t say any more than “Hi” to the two older men at the gate. We were required

to buy a gram of overpriced Afghan hash to enter the patio, but that's what we had come for. Upstairs on the roof, a half dozen picnic tables were partitioned by curtains and sheltered under a large canopy. There we could smoke their hash and drink our own cans of beer. We split the cost with Bertie and divided it up to take most of the hash out with us. It wasn't very much each, and it was nearly four times the price of weed in Canada.

"How much was it?" Zuzanna wanted Bertie to clarify. "Bloody hell, it's expensive here."

Bertie shrugged.

Tim gave his portion to me to hold. "Can you carry mine too?"

"Where should I put this?"

"Oh, yeah, the police don't need any reason to search you," Tim said. "They can just say a crime happened somewhere within a mile, and then do it if they want to."

Bertie, rolling a spliff in his hands, interrupted Tim, "Yeah, but your brother's not a black kid. The police aren't going to harass him."

I put the small hash clump up in a baggie and tucked it in my sock.

"If they find it in your sock, it's clearly yours," my brother stopped me. "Put it in a second bag inside your backpack. If you get stopped say nothing. They'll turn whatever you say against you. Your reasonable defence is that you just found that bag and were taking it into a lost and found."

Bertie shrugged and spoke quietly. He was used to these debates with my brother. "Is that what you did when you were caught by the police?"

"No Bertie. I spoke to the police, yeah? I said the things I was carrying in my bag weren't mine, and then the police wrote that in the report, and then they also wrote

that I was drinking one of the same brands of beer that was in the bag, and now I have to go to court anyway, and maybe they wouldn't have written down about the beer if I hadn't said anything, right?" My brother suddenly laughed after that and turned to me. "Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, I have to go to court later this summer, so you definitely have to hold the hash for us. I'll tell you about it later."

"What about the MDMA?" Zuzanna asked.

"Oh yeah." Tim turned to me. "Can you carry the MDMA too?" I tucked it into my bag.

Later didn't come that night. The dance club underneath the hashbar opened for what seemed like a small crowd for a Friday, and Zuzanna, already needing to hang on to railings to stand or sit, suggested we dance downstairs. We left our bags at our rooftop table and paid cover to get into the main floor. People in dresses and collared shirts perhaps had no idea there was a hashbar on the roof, but we went back and forth between dancing downstairs and sitting, sweaty with our cans of beer, up on the patio as long as we had Bertie with us to get through the gate.

Tim asked me for my backpack and got out the shopping bag with a small rolled baggie inside. The MDMA. He separated a small amount with his fingernails for us to put in our drinks. "Not very much," Zuzanna insisted.

He wasn't certain how much drug experience I had. "Do you want a little bit of it?" MDMA, the active amphetamine in ecstasy. The party drug of London that summer. So let's try some. We finished our open drinks and returned to our corner of the dance bar downstairs.

I wasn't sure if what I felt that night was the MDMA in my system or just the hash and strong beer. Most of the rest of the evening was a jumble of dancing, falling,

and laughing. The night glowed as we passed, holding hands on the dance floor, from the purple and blue club up to the warm fairy lights of the private patio, but it would have glowed any evening that I was similarly buzzed and high in Canada.

The sky cooled off and clouded over even more as it darkened, but the beer and dancing kept us warm until we put on our sweaters and grabbed our bags to leave. By midnight, when the dance bar was emptying of those who needed the subway home, Zuzanna took us back to her squat at Barbican to rejoin her squatmates, Lidija, Jakub, Niko, and the Spanish brothers, around her bedroom table.

My brother busted out the MDMA, although Zuzanna said no thanks. She was leaving tomorrow. I still didn't know what the drug felt like in my drink earlier. This time, Tim gave it to Bertie who used an art textbook of Lidija's to crush it up into lines that could be snorted. Faster acting, he said. I hesitated. Should I take more? Niko was already bending over to put a cut plastic straw between his nose and the powder. I was sober enough to say no, thank you, but I was drunk enough to ask to swallow a little bit more.

I remember Barbican squat as a blanket of darkness with few lights inside. I remember us shushing each other after Lidija went to sleep, playing hide-and-seek-and-be-quiet in the dark stairwell with only one window to the city, stifling our laughs as we bumped into each other sneaking across the pitchblack landings. I remember being happy with friends.

At dawn early the next morning, Bertie went home to his squat, and Niko offered to share his mattress with me in the room next to Zuzanna's where we slept clothed in the cool of London's morning light.

Chapter 3

Our view of the city tumbled across nearby rooftops. From six floors up on the roof of the Barbican squat, another building, garden, or heating installation always blocked the horizon. Towering in the distance were the skyscrapers of central London and, across the river, the Shard, a slender pyramid of glass and steel, its splintered spire still under construction. The sun was warm that morning, heating the dried tar of their makeshift terrace, but we huddled under blankets against a wind that beat across all the roofs of London.

Zuzanna left that morning. We said goodbye to her in a subdued ceremony of hugs over a bagel and bun breakfast on the roof of the squat.

“I really hope you can meet up with us later, maybe in Budapest,” my brother said to Zuzanna.

“I’ll see how the summer goes,” she hesitated to promise him.

Her going-away party and my welcome to London party would become one night among many for my brother and me while we looked for our own place in the city.

Our search for a squat began as social calls to my brother’s squatting friends, many of whom he hadn’t seen in a month or more. We went looking for a place to crash for a night, to ask if they knew of any squats looking for crew, or to ask if any of them wanted to join us if we found our own empty building.

I had a small hangover that morning, but not much. Our drinking had been stretched out over the day, and it gave my stomach a chance to digest the poison. I may have still been strung out from the four hour time change. Mostly I felt drained, silent,

like I was glad I was already in London and didn't have to get on a flight that day too. Still, we had to find a place to stay. Lidija offered that we could leave our travel backpacks at the Barbican with her if we wanted. Their squat hadn't been served any papers yet. There would be lots of notice before an eviction.

Tim and I left the Barbican and took the bus to start our search at Bertie's squat. It was the one with the eviction resistance that Tim risked being arrested at. Squinting at the bus schedule without his glasses, Tim explained to me a way we might be able to ride the bus for free if there was a crowd, but we were the only two waiting when it pulled up. Under the watch of the driver, we tapped in to pay the fare.

Bertie's squat was a fenced-off, long, two-story apartment block waiting for over a year for a wrecking ball and something more expensive to replace it. The hallways and the backlot, all caked in layers of spray-painted skulls, cassette tapes, and bubble letters, were the only communal areas. Everyone who squatted there had their own narrow, one-bedroom flat—although, according to Bertie, not all the toilets worked.

We sat cross-legged on the floor in Bertie's room. He had painted most the walls streaky black before giving up and leaving marker graffiti in the entryway. My brother and I brought cans of cider and Polish beer for the three of us. Tim drank strong beers because they were cheaper to get buzzed on. Bertie hated beer and drank only cider. We opened them tapped cans together as Bertie rolled a spliff.

The building had been served papers that said they could be evicted any day starting yesterday, but the bailiffs were required to give 24 hours. The squat got notice for the morning I arrived and threw a big party to invite everyone they knew to resist the bailiffs. The bailiffs didn't come. Bertie still hadn't found another place, but he had an

ex's he could go to if needed. He would move in with us if we found our own spot. Over drinks, we talked about what we wanted in a squat.

“Let's take him to a proper squat party tonight,” Bertie said, emphasizing the word *proper* and nodding to me with the lit spliff in his hands. “At the Fire Station squat. Maybe they could use some more people. Maybe someone's there you haven't texted yet.”

We could meet his friend Irina and stay at her flat afterwards, Tim suggested. Irina was in uni, and her dad was a rich Russian who paid for her studies and a one-bedroom flat near Southbank.

The Fire Station squat, Bertie told me, was a giant garage south of the river. Squatters lived there, but they were going to set up a soundsystem and charge 10 quid entry—probably only 20 for four of us if Bertie knew anyone at the door.

“It's not a *proper* squat party with only one rig,” my brother said, but he liked the idea, and began texting Irina.

Even though the party location wasn't posted yet, Tim and Bertie knew some of the organizers and the squat. *Call the party line +44----- after 11pm for the address in CENTRAL*, the event listing said. That was how large squat raves avoided getting shut down before the crowds showed up.

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The party turned out to be a bust. Bertie, Tim, and I wandered Southbank with cans of beer and cider and decided to go early. Maybe we could help out inside for free entry. Bertie was hopeful. They let us in no problem, but everyone was sitting around

under the bright ceiling lights and, like us, waiting for the party to start. The sound system hadn't arrived yet.

It was a building the size of a gymnasium with a wide open truck bay. One of the organizers was riding around on a bicycle inside. You could've played softball there, I thought. The squatters slept in the offices in one corner of the building, Bertie explained, where we could see two floors of windows looking down into the empty space. "I want a squat we can ride bikes inside," I joked to Tim.

Tim spoke to some of the people he knew here, and they said this squat had gotten papers already too. We could stay with them if we wanted, but they were being evicted next week—thus, the party. Research Chemical Freddie, a long-haired squatter in a woven cap, coke-bottle glasses, and dusty construction work clothes came over to sit with us in the corner of the large room. He was called Research Chemical Freddie behind his back because he always seemed to be trying out experimental drugs he bought online.

The squatters were not going to try to resist the eviction, Freddie explained to us in his unique, nasal British accent—I could tell British this time. "The building is being renovated for a new fire station, not some housing highrise. We're not going to occupy it against that."

Bertie had been rolling a thin spliff and offered it to Freddie to light.

"No thanks. I don't smoke tobacco anymore," he said. He was younger than me, maybe nineteen. "But I've got some prescription-strength antihistamines if you want. They get you really messed-up mixed with whisky."

"Are they your prescription?" Bertie asked. They used to squat together.

"Actually, yeah. I'm allergic to dust."

“Then keep them for your allergies.” Bertie scolded him like a younger brother.

Irina showed up. She was Freddie’s age, or Sal’s, dressed in runners, jeans, a sweater, and a speckled scarf for the evening. She didn’t look like her dad was rich, and she didn’t speak with a Russian accent, but her voice still had strange inflections from learning British English in boarding school as a second language. She paid the squatters at the door to get in, she said, but they warned her the soundsystem might not come. “I brought a gift”, she proclaimed, and passed my brother a bottle of vodka. He offered her a beer.

Freddie told us about another party out in Zone 50, only about 65 minutes by transit, he said, but he wouldn’t have the address until the hotline opened at 11pm. He said we could get on the train at Black Friars for free—there would be no controllers after 10—and we could head out there and wait for the address from the info line. Instead, we stayed at the Fire Station and opened the vodka.

We were sitting in a dusty corner of the truck bay when shouting broke out at the other end. It was in Italian. Two men were shoving each other and yelling. One took off his shirt and threw it to the concrete. Others ran up toward them. One of Italians was supposed to be with the people bringing the soundsystem, Freddie explained.

“It’s amazing how much two men before a fight are like wolves,” observed Irina, “trying to decide if the threat to their status is worth more than the risk to their body. They should just chill.”

We decided to leave. Freddie was staying there tonight, but he told us he’d let us know if he heard about any squats opening that needed people.

We wandered the Thames path, looking out at the lights of Westminster opposite, and sat with our open vodka on the river in front of the headquarters of MI6,

its impenetrable tinted windows above us. Bertie caught a night bus back to his squat. Irina invited Tim and me to crash in her small one-bedroom. I think she wanted Tim to stay in her room, but he passed out snoring on her couch, his glasses hanging from his face by one arm. She gave me blankets to sleep on the carpeted floor, which was more than enough. I was thin, and young, and I could sleep on my stomach on a carpet in a way that none of my bones would dig into the floor and nothing would hurt the next morning.

I woke up to Tim already awake and texting. “I know a house party where we can stay tonight,” he said with a smile. “You know, I’ll never run out of friends for us to crash with. But we still need to find somewhere.”

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Irina was out of school for the summer and came with us to the Sunday night house party. The hosts were old friends of Tim’s from parties organized on the decentralized hospitality website BeWelcome. It was a free website to share your couch with travellers or to crash on other people’s couches while travelling. Tim had used it a lot, hosting travellers both when he used to rent and in his squats. The members of the website organized social events as well.

That’s where Tim met his friends American Rachel and Irish Sean, a couple who rented a three bedroom house with six others, an average of two-and-a-half people per bedroom, for cheap rent. It was a narrow townhouse two floors high in a long row of similar buildings. They also offered up their only communal room to any backpackers, international travellers, or students who needed a free place to sleep for a couple days.

That was how they and their roommates all found a place in the city after all. The living room looked like a hostel bedroom with three daybeds set up like couches, and I later saw that the bedrooms upstairs were just as crowded. It's basically what you need to do to afford rent in London, Rachel explained to me, and if they were doing it, they might as well help others with the spare space in their living room. A tent also took over a corner of the backyard where a young Czech man was staying with them for the month.

We didn't break out the MDMA there, or even smoke inside, but the beers and mixed drinks flowed like the stream of travellers who passed through that house. A Canadian who had stayed with them last month had even drawn the Canadian flag, with a red beer can in place of the maple leaf, and stuck it to their fridge. I bumbled about, drunk, from room to room to garden and back, having conversations with the ten people, roommates and travellers, who were staying there that night, and as many guests, like ourselves, who had come for their Sunday-night party. After Irina disappeared upstairs and Tim stayed smoking in the back garden, the crowd in the kitchen leaning against facing counter and table shared their travel stories and why they were visiting London from France, from Italy, from Egypt, and even Brazil. "You must go to the British museum," a Swede told me. "The place that has all the stolen artifacts?" the Egyptian asked, standing from the table to join the conversation. "Yes, because it is owned by the royals," continued the Swede, "and they don't charge anything to get in. It's free." Here again were almost as many languages as people, and I felt lucky to be able to speak one language the same as them. And they were tourists who used websites like BeWelcome, so they also believed that the best things in life and travel, like this night, should be free. That is how you escape the pre-packaged kitsch and live, really live, the way living and

breathing people do, I said. Well, not at the British Museum. That was how dead people lived. I was drunk and a little stoned saying this.

Sometime in the night, Tim and I promised Rachel and Sean we would go hitchhiking with them on a three-night trip to camp near King Arthur's castle ruins and to visit a Cornish beach. They were actually going to do it the day after next, and they woke us up to breakfast reminding us to make good on our promise. Sean made a special vegan breakfast just for Tim.

"You're vegan?" I looked at my brother. I didn't realize until now. "What about the sushi?" He had eaten the vegetable rolls, I guess. He didn't seem to care about my questions.

"Hemingway always kept his drunken promises," Rachel said to us.

"That's so he would remember not to make them," my brother replied.

We went back to the Barbican squat to get our bags, and returned to the BeWelcome house to drink again with friends the next night.

We tried to hitchhike with Rachel and Sean. At the first hitch spot west of London, my brother and I split from them when their first ride had only space for two. Then it started to rain. Standing in wet shoes and wearing ponchos over our backpacks, we waited five hours for every one hour we spent in a car, and we only made it to Bristol by nightfall the first day. Tim sent some texts to people he knew in Bristol.

Rachel and Sean had made it the whole way in three quick rides. They were dry and already in their tent from where they could see the beach.

Soaking wet, we decided to turn around rather than set up our tent in the rain. We hitched through the night and got back to London with the morning traffic, 24 hours after leaving.

“Well. That wasn’t much fun.” I still had the spirits to joke with Tim when our last ride dropped us off at a tube station in South London. We slept for a day straight at the Barbican squat.

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That weekend was Bertie’s graduation from art school, one of the most prestigious art schools in London—although I didn’t know it then. The highest-paid living artist, Damien Hirst, who cheated the industry with a diamond encrusted skull, had graduated from Bertie’s same art program. Tim explained the finances behind it: if an art investor pays for all your diamonds, you can sell the skull for triple the price of the stones, and suddenly you’re a millionaire artist and your patron is a millionaire investor. Lidija, the shy Latvian from the Barbican squat, was graduating with Bertie too, but it was Bertie who had invited us.

“I didn’t know you were graduating from art school!” I exclaimed to Bertie. He met us after we got off the tube near the school.

“I’m not,” he said in his quiet, calculated way. I often pictured him talking with a rolling filter between his lips, but there wasn’t one this time.

“He dropped out,” Tim explained.

Bertie just shrugged and passed me a can of cider.

“What I don’t understand,” Tim began, “is whether you’re dropping out because you’re not submitting a final project, or whether you’re dropping out because the graduation panel wouldn’t accept *nothing* as a final project.”

“I asked them for a blank wall in the graduation gallery,” Bertie said, not answering the question as he led us toward the school. “I want to see if they put it there.”

The school security made us finish our cans in the street, and we walked into the crowded courtyard. Every Hong Kong parent, British grandparent, and Russian oligarch who bought their child into the school was there to see what they had paid for. Bertie and Lidija were there on scholarship and debt. Hirst, the diamond-skull artist, was discovered by his millionaire investor when he was only a student, and everyone here knew the story. There were students in tuxedos, students in custom-sewn pink leopard print, and students in army coats sleeved with metal and plastic pins. Bertie wore his regular all-black with blazer.

I would have taken it all a bit more seriously if I wasn't already one cider in. A waiter came by offering free wine in plastic cups, so I filled my fingers with glasses for each of us.

“I can see why you tossed it all,” I told Bertie.

He glared at me but raised his plastic wine glass along with ours.

“There's a squat party afterwards at a mansion abandoned by *Sir* Anish Kapoor,” Bertie said. “It's a benefit gig to protest the Olympics and his ugly tower. I'd rather be there than here.” Anish Kapoor was the artist who built the wire monstrosity overlooking London's brand new Olympic park.

“There's time for both,” my brother said. “Let's go roll a spliff under your blank piece of wall, Bertie.”

Lidija was there with her parents from Latvia. She was wearing a breezy outfit made from scarves and sashes she found dumpster diving and had sewed together. I

don't know if she brought her parents over from Barbican squat or where they were staying in London. She introduced them to us, but she stayed with them most of the evening. There was a lot of anxiety somewhere behind her small cat-like smile and empty stare. Maybe Bertie told his mother not to come down from Scotland.

Australian James, the punk who had been working the door at the Palestine activist squat, was a good friend of Bertie's, Lidija's, and Tim's from their last squat together. He came to meet us there. He was called Australian James or Punk James to differentiate him from British James, another squatter I never met. "You know, I don't get dressed up for just anybody, Bertie," Punk James told his friend. He wore his regular patched clothes and vegan leather combat boots, but he had used more than 5 quid in hairspray to put his hair up in six-inch green liberty spikes for the night. I handed him a free glass of wine.

"Complimentary wine?" he asked. "I knew this was worth getting dressed up for."

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The next morning, waking up in a strange bunk bed in James's squat, I only vaguely remembered the walk from the art school to the Olympic protest party and from there, the night bus ride to James's, where we had to crawl out a window and cross a terrace to get to the part of the squat he lived in. The bathroom was back across the outdoor crawl. James's squat had a big steel door that could be unlocked with a key from either side. I remember noisily bumping into a dangling string of stolen Mercedes hood ornaments hanging just inside the door. That was the strap attached to their spare

key to get out so that no one would accidentally take it with them when they left the squat. I woke up when James came in with four mugs of morning tea. Tim and Lidija, still wearing their clothes from yesterday, were in the bunk beneath me.

“Last night was bloody munted,” James said. His spikes were half fallen over and stuck out off of his head.

I showed Tim the only photo from last night on my cheap phone camera. Someone else had taken it. It was blurry, but it had Tim holding a can in one hand and leaning over a railing in a mansion stairwell to hold my belt for stability with his other hand as I was scaling the banister to reach a window over a three-floor drop. The memory of the graduation gallery and the protest squat party came back to me like a scratchy TV broadcast.

“That was a gongshow,” Tim said.

“No, it was beautiful!” cooed Lidija, still feeling high on the buzz of her finished grad gallery.

The chaos started at the art graduation party. Australian James and I had never chatted before, but we got along great while we were both drunk. On the other hand, I might have both endeared myself to Bertie and pissed him off. The school hadn’t given him the blank wall he requested. Where we expected to find his name alphabetically among the conceptual artist graduation class instead began the artwork of the student who came after him. Apparently that greatly annoyed me, because I wouldn’t stop talking about how Bertie was the best artist there, and his blank wall would have shown soul and honesty, and all of these other students were poseurs.

I had studied art in university electives. I liked to think that I could talk about art. I especially liked to think I could talk about art when I was high and drunk. But

speaking honestly, I had only studied enough to think a third of the students there were trying too hard, a third were doing something I didn't understand, and the last third, like Bertie and Lidija, were geniuses. Lidija told me I couldn't stop gushing over how much I loved her gallery pieces. "You were practically kissing it," she stuck out her lips mocking me. Her work was large cubes of granite and steel. I don't remember what I thought of it, only how big it was.

I lost Tim for part of the night and ended up sitting in a dark room watching a student film alone with the artist who made it. It was blue waves and the story of a whale projected onto the wall from a swaying animatronic projector. The artist kept topping up my glass with wine as long as I watched his movie. When James came to find me because they were rolling a spliff in the courtyard, I stumbled out of there swaying more than the waves in the art project. That could have been the end of the night for me if the hash hadn't cut through the drunken blur and if there weren't complimentary garnished crackers as well as wine.

At one point, James and I were exploring the school and found an unlocked auditorium lit only by emergency lights. I was ranting to him how *true art* couldn't just sit on some rich bastard's wall, collecting value, it had to listen to the state of the damn world, it had to have something to say, and it had to be able to speak. We couldn't see any path to find a bathroom, so I relieved myself of the complimentary wine in a trash can, and James found a flat-screen monitor that wasn't locked away. "The squat could use another monitor," he said. "Complimentary flatscreen!" I exclaimed. "I'll watch the door."

On the way out of that darkened wing, a security guard approached us. I walked up to him complaining loudly about my friend's missing artwork. "They stole his spot!"

I said, and James ducked out a side door with the monitor in his small, overstuffed backpack. We regrouped outside, rolled a spliff, and grabbed more cider and beer from the off-license. Lidija joined us then, her parents somewhere else. She was so drunk and chatty talking with Tim and James that I remember thinking I was seeing another side of her.

From there it was onward to the squat protest party at the abandoned investment property of the artist who built London's Olympic tower.

I remember less of that, but I remember arriving to silence. It was actually still early, 9pm, and there was a poetry reading in a large study on the main floor of the blocky, bare mansion. There were over fifty people sitting, some on chairs, some on the floor, listening to poetry that I was too drunk to make out. An acoustic musician played after the poetry. I got excited. It was quiet Evan, from the Barbican squat, in his tracksuit! He played and sang two anti-war protest songs in his native Polish, and when everyone clapped, I hollered and cheered his name in encouragement. "EVAN! EVAN!" I kept shouting.

His name was Iwan, he laughed at me later, as we sat drinking beers upstairs during the rest of the acoustic music, but he was nervous in front of everyone, he said. Seeing us show up put a smile in his songs, was how he described it in his second language.

After the guitars were put away, the crowd at the squatted mansion grew, but the average age and average cost of clothing began to decrease. A DJ was set up on the ground floor with a small sound system. We danced in the darkened main room to electronic, and we took breaks smoking in one of the other rooms. That's when I lost track of Bertie, and when Tim, James, and I began exploring upstairs. James said I

climbed on his shoulders in one room, which I vaguely remembered, in order to rip the chandelier from the ceiling, which I don't remember. I told him he should put it in his backpack too, and I only gave up when I found out for sure that it wouldn't fit with the monitor. I think the photo of us climbing the stairwell was taken when someone said upstairs was getting too hot and I was trying to open a window. At some point in the morning, the music shut down, but we were still dancing, ten of us. A grey-haired woman in a windbreaker got a cardboard box to beat on, and we made our own drum-and-bass beat to dance to, hitting the walls, and stamping our feet, and for us, it was glorious.

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The morning after, Lidija left to get back to her parents just as short Austrian Niko, the fan of ketamine from the Barbican squat, came to meet us. I was still sitting hungover on the top bunk with my mug of tea. Tim and Niko had been texting. Niko was going to cycle to the Creamery to buy some hash and wanted to know if we wanted some. Tim proposed we first smoke the little bit of expensive hash we had left. He asked Niko if he wanted to roll it for us. It occurred to me that I'd never seen Tim roll a spliff. He always got Bertie to do it. Maybe neither he nor I knew how to pinch tobacco in paper to roll a spliff with hash.

Apparently Niko had also been at the mansion protest squat last night too. I was still fitting my memories together.

"Maybe this will help you remember," Niko grinned, passing me the second toke of the spliff.

A week now in London, I had grown more used to the tobacco everyone rolled their hash in. I knew to draw in shallower breaths. I'd get less stoned, but I'd cough less too. "What I don't understand is why they were protesting the Olympics," I wondered aloud as I handed Punk James the spliff.

"Ah, come on, Ed." James mocked disappointment in me in his Australian accent. James's grandmother was British, like Tim's grandfather through his Dad. The two of them were here on ancestry visas. "You kept asking me that last night too. You kept saying, 'Isn't it good that all these countries come together instead of going to war?'" He put on a fake American accent when imitating me

"There were Olympics in 1930s Germany too," Niko added in his Austrian accent.

Tim nodded as he took the spliff next. Apparently it had been explained to me twice last night.

When James realized I didn't remember, he endeavoured to tell me again. "It's not that the Olympics are bad on their own. It's what it comes down to." He rubbed his fingers together, pantomiming holding cash. "How much did the Olympics cost the city of London?"

That's when it came back to me. I pieced together his point partly from my drunken memories and partly from what he said to me again that morning. The Olympics cost the government £11 billion. How many rough sleepers are there in London? He had asked me last night. Say 110,000. The city could have cancelled the Olympics, given every at-risk person 100,000 pounds, and stimulated *the economy* that way. He said *the economy* as if he was gagging. Instead the city and country paid millions to cheesy pro-England artists, like the one who built the observation tower, and

to building contractors, and to their mates, all to make an £11 billion global TV advertising spot for real estate in England. London is the city everyone should move to. Come to London. London's at the centre of the world. Then London's elite, a mix of royal descendants from all across the UK, Europe, and the Middle East, double their property investment dollars in the time it takes to announce and host the Olympics. And everyday workers, like the guy who sells us cans from the off-license, will never be able to afford a house for his kids here.

I just nodded.

"Are you coming with me to buy hash?" Niko asked. It was another drunken promise. I'd made it last night when James had said I could borrow his bike to go.

I was a little stoned from the spliff, but not too stoned to cycle. There was a bike and a helmet that fit me at James's squat, and the sun was out when we departed. Niko made me wear a helmet even though he didn't. I made him agree to cycle slower so I could keep up. I had never cycled on the left-hand side of the road.

With the slow movement of hash behind my eyes, I breathed in the summer air, and my hangover seemed to be blown away by the wind as soon as I was outside and moving. There weren't many cars in the middle of the morning in central London, and staying to the left was as easy as following Niko and the white line in front of me. His loose grey tank top, stained with bike grease, flapped in the wind over a black binder that matched his steel-studded cap. I felt unsteady on the bike to start, but within a block, I felt like I was a teenager again, learning to ride fast on gravel roads, and the faster we cycled, the steadier I was. The day and the street breezed by.

I thought through my week so far in the city of London. The Barbican squat, the table of five languages, the Palestinian Solidarity squat, the secret hashbar, the evicted

apartment blocks, the squat party that never materialized at the Fire Station, Irina's floor, Rachel and Sean's daybeds, the rain and the highway, the art show graduation, and the protest party last night. This week had been more exercise than I got at any gym back home. This week had been a tour and a taste of a lot that went on in the city of London.

The Creamery was a long-term squat covered in vegetal ivy-like art that got its name, one of its names, because someone used to sell light brown hash there. The squatters there were about a decade older than at any other squat I had been in and mostly British, it seemed. Niko knew two of the men, and we stayed and chatted and smoked while he bought hash.

"How much is in a dime bag?" I asked, and then, stoned, I corrected myself. "Sorry—I mean how hash much for 10 quid. I don't know if you have dimes in the UK."

"That's alright," the younger Brit with sandy hair laughed. "We expect that from *colonials*." I'd never heard a Brit be elitist over Canadians before, even joking.

The hash was less than half the price of Bertie's secret bar.

I stayed mostly quiet after that. The more stoned I got on the spliff they rolled, the easier it was to let Niko chat with the two men. The hash was Moroccan, they said, brought up through Spain. I asked why there wasn't much straight weed here. The climate had to be great for outdoor crop. It was the private space needed to grow it, they said, compared to where I came from. Dense hash smuggled up from Morocco was cheaper to bring across the border than for people to grow fresh in the UK.

Their squat home was a work of art, a collage on every wall, with a garden in the middle, growing verdant out of spray-painted tires and coffee cans. Upstairs, they had

made their own balcony of tied scaffolding pipes and planks looking down on the garden. From below the pipes formed the mouth of a massive grinning Cheshire cat spray-painted onto their home. This is what squats could look like if they lasted for years.

We cycled back to James's squat the same way we'd come, and I began to recognize a couple of the streets we passed—although I still didn't know where in the city we were. Tim and I needed a place to stay. If we were going to Europe this summer to visit our cousin in Budapest, we had a month in London. James had said he could host us at his squat, but only for a couple of nights. They had a squat rule for overnight guests.

When we got back, I showed Tim the hash I bought, and the corners of his mouth raised into a smile. "You bought all that?" Nearly \$80 Canadian. Eight hours work doing editing for the magazine that used to pay me. It was about the same cost as premium weed in Canada, so I bought enough to last.

"Yeah—so we don't need to search for it or borrow from Bertie as much."

I decided to tally my expenses in my notebook, and I climbed back up into the top bunk. There was dance bar admission, transit, more transit, the MDMA, food on the go as well as occasional groceries, expensive hash at the bar, countless ciders and beer, and now a block of cheaper hash. One week, \$400 Canadian. One quarter of my savings. Forty hours work on my Canadian minimum wage spent in one week, and I wasn't working. Another month like this, I'd be flat out.

I looked down over at Tim, still sitting on the bottom bunk texting on his phone. "I was thinking on the cycle, do you want to stay at the Palestine Solidarity Squat with the free food and the mattresses?"

He had been thinking the same thing, he said, but he wanted to double check.

“You know it’s a sober squat, right?”

Chapter 4

The slender office-stack was in a row of identical storefronts on Gray's Inn road near the banking district in central London. Its nondescript brick front, five-floors high and three-windows wide, could have been any clerk's office if it weren't for the boarded up windows. The building sat empty waiting for plans to be torn down and replaced with something newer, taller, and more expensive. While it sat empty in central London, it was probably rising in value by hundreds of pounds a day. That was how the squatters found it. They moved in, opened the basement to free lunches, ran workshops on the upper floors, and invited a woman who lived out of her motorized scooter to sleep each night on the main level. Tim and I only needed a place until we left for our cousin's in Budapest. We hoped that after the Palestine protest events ended, we could stay on in the squat. Going there turned out to be more fortuitous than either of us expected. It was there I learned how squatting actually worked.

Our first night at the squat was almost its last. A doctor from MSF who treated gunshot wounds on Palestinian protesters in the Gaza strip had just finished speaking when Issac, one of the squat organizers, pulled all the overnight squatters and students together for an end-of-day meeting. Issac was British, but he had spent time in America as a kid, which dulled his accent. Issac had a military haircut and a voice that could have read weather reports on the radio. He was only my age, but he had been squatting a while, my brother said. He and Issac had both been to court defending squats before. Issac was charismatic too, and he organized the student activists there who were new to squatting.

He explained the situation at the squat. They opened the abandoned office building only days before their two-week event schedule for Palestine Solidarity. Within the first 30 days of any occupation, owners can submit papers scheduling a court date for an interim possession order. If the case can't be disputed by the occupants, the judge will grant possession of the building back to the owners, giving the squatters 24 hours notice to vacate before bailiffs turn up for the eviction. Their squat had received papers that week, and their court appearance was tomorrow morning. If they lost in court, they'd have to be out before they finished their last two days of events. Unlike at Bertie's longer-lasting apartment block squat, squatters can't resist an eviction ordered within the first 30 days of moving in. Staying in the building when an interim possession order had been granted by a judge escalates from a matter of civil dispute into a criminal offence.

Issac explained to everyone that the squat's strategy was to show up to court following all the protocols and insist the papers they received had been improperly filed. Issac had been to the Advisory Service for Squatters for help, and they pointed out that signatures were missing on several of the pages in the middle, and the mandatory second copy had not been included.

"What are our chances?" asked a young British woman who had been helping at the squat since it opened. "Who cares about a second copy?"

Issac had never tried this defence before. My brother had.

"It depends on the judge's mood that day," Tim shrugged to the group. "I've won cases like this, and I've lost them. It comes down to whether the judge likes you or thinks you're wasting his time. By the law as written, yeah, the owners improperly filed

their papers, so if the judge cared about the law, he'd reject the interim possession, but in the mind of a judge who hates squatters, who cares, right? It's all just formality."

Issac asked Tim if he wanted to come to court too. My brother checked the names on the papers and laughed. He'd already been in front of that judge helping Bertie's squat.

"Maybe you have a chance with this one," Tim said. "He's a long-faced guy who seems to be proud of going by the book." Tim didn't think it would help the case if he appeared in front of the same judge for a second squat.

Tim and Issac talked about court and the squat before Issac went home for the night to another squat up in Camden. He would need to get different clothes for court. Issac had only intended to run the Palestine Solidarity Squat for two weeks. The court case only came a little earlier than expected, he said, but it wasn't a surprise. If they won the case, anyone who wanted could take over the squat after, sure. But, Issac was tempted to show respect to the owners and vacate at the end of the two weeks if the owners would let them stay for the events.

"Why not keep the squat open for anyone who wants it? For people who need a place to live?" Tim said. "Share the housing, tie up the eviction courts and the bailiffs a little bit longer, and maybe spare someone else's squat another week." My brother was looking for a squat for us.

Issac agreed.

Whether or not they got to host their last two days of events and whether we had a place to stay for any longer depended on the court case. Issac had called that meeting to prepare the event organizers for either situation, but also to ask who wanted to go

with him to court the next morning. He felt it helped their chances if some of the young student activists and organizers went too.

“You should go with them to court,” Tim jabbed me in the ribs.

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We found out that night that the Palestine Solidarity Squat was dry everywhere except the sleeping and social top floor. The students brought wine and cans to celebrate on the chance it was their last night in the squat. I tried to learn names, but many of these people, my age and younger, I wouldn't see again after tomorrow. Among them was a Jewish student from Goldsmiths, a home counties teenager who said he had never been in a squat before, and a British-Palestinian teenager whose parents had moved to the UK before she could remember, and more. We sat in circles on the floor playing a drinking game of throwing cards at a can, and they talked about making a better world the way that only students do.

“Do you have access to the roof of the squat?” I asked. Before the events, some of the squatters had climbed out a top floor dormer window, five floors over the street, and found a way up, they said. We weren't in any state to go check.

Thoroughly bad at throwing cards with no glasses on, Tim got drunk much faster than anyone else and fell asleep on a mattress beside the game. I played around him and chatted with the others long enough to wake up with a hangover the next morning. Issac was calling for everyone who was going to court to be ready in twenty minutes.

With a headache and with pants still stained from the mansion squat party, I wiped my underarms and put on my only collared shirt. Issac, five others, and I went to

the court house. Issac did all the talking to register for the hearing, and I found an abandoned water bottle in the waiting room that helped me feel human again. The court case was simple, informal, and—maybe it was the hangover—oddly surreal. The fate of the squat hinged on the words spoken in that room.

The seven of us plus the judge, the court clerk, and the attorney for the absentee building owners sat around a single table. This was civil court, not criminal court. The table was large enough to fit us all, but small enough that I ended up sitting next to the building-owner's attorney, our opponent, a woman in pumps and a suit-dress. I then cared much less whether or not I still smelled from the last time I washed in the bathroom with no shower at Barbican squat. The judge, sitting almost opposite me, was not in robes. Issac presented his argument in his best radio show voice, deeper, more formal, and much more British than I had heard him speak at the squat. The owner's attorney seemed flustered at Issac's accusations that the paperwork had been filed incorrectly, a mistake that was likely her office's fault, not the building owner's. The judge seemed taken by Issac's charm and annoyed by the attorney, who at one point blamed the law for being unclear on the matter of two copies.

Sitting at the table with us, the judge shut his eyes and placed his fingers in front of his lips to deliver his verdict. It was a speech in a paragraph.

He acknowledged the building's owners were the rightful owners; he acknowledged the occupants, persons unknown, represented by Mr. Issac -----, were not legally entitled to inhabit the building and had no prior agreement with the building's owners to do so; he acknowledged the claim being brought forward by the building owner's attorney; he acknowledged that it was submitted within the required thirty days for an interim possession order; and, he continued, he acknowledged the

owner's right to possession of the property following the proper legal procedures. It all tumbled from behind his fingers as if it were going to be followed by the *but* that came next. "But," he said, the occupants have the right to the proper legal procedure, and possession of the building located at 2-- Gray's Inn Road shall be granted to the owners after their representatives submit the necessary paperwork to the occupants following the aforementioned procedure.

Not everyone with us immediately knew what the judge had said. But the attorney knew. And Issac—saying, "Thank you, Sir"—knew. Whether Issac had won over the judge or the judge had wanted to teach a new barrister to file their paperwork as required, the judge had granted a delay just long enough for the squat to host the rest of the events. Once the owners filed again, which would take at least a day, the papers could be taped to the door any morning, and the squatters would then have 24-hours notice before bailiffs could show up to evict them.

It was a job done well for Issac and a victory for the five of them, and I shared in their elated retelling of the courtroom scene over and over once we were out on the street. The protest squat would be able to stay open until the end of their schedule. Afterwards, Issac had another squat to go back to. The students I had only met yesterday got their climactic victory over injustice at the end of their two week project, and they were excited for their last day-and-a-half of events before they would return to their dormitories, student flats, or parents' homes for the summer. I was excited for them, but the result meant mine and Tim's search for a squat continued.

"No it doesn't," Tim told me when we got back. "The owners have to issue new papers. That's it. Issac won." Every victory in court is only a partial victory, he explained. He gathered Issac to double check the outcome of the court case. Squatting is

always waiting for the next eviction letter, Tim said. Obviously the building belongs to the owners. The only reason you go to court is to drag it out. We went to court, we drug it out. That's a victory, he exclaimed, congratulating Issac.

Issac hadn't seen in that way at first, but Tim's enthusiasm spread. Issac had won the squat for us. "Congratulations on your new squat," he said to my brother and me.

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After everyone left, our first week in our own squat in London was wilder than my first week in the entire city. The squat was not only mine and my brother's. Issac offered the squat to anyone who was there who wanted to stay.

Most of the squatters had other squats, and this one wasn't any better. The legal case was already decided. We knew the owners actively wanted it back. At any point, there could be a knock on the door with a bundle of papers signifying 24 hours to vacate. It could come today, or in ten days. But if didn't come in the next two weeks, the eviction would be downgraded to a civil matter. With enough squatters, the eviction could be resisted then. No one but first-timers or in-betweeners thought that this was an ideal squat, but that's what my brother and I were.

So too was Dan. Dan was tall, between the heights of my brother. He was between our ages as well, but I thought of him as a couple years younger than me until I found out. He had eyebrow piercings, the majority of his head was shaved, and he was as skinny as me. He was from up near Newcastle, basically the New Brunswick of the UK, we later laughed. And this summer in London was his first time away from his

mom's place. He had run out of money in hostels and had been bouncing between squats with people he knew for a month.

The first night, Tim, Dan, and I were alone in the six floor building. We opened beers and made a game out of throwing three foam mattresses down the stairs, one landing at a time, from the top floor to the bottom, to set up our sleeping area where we would hear a knock on the door. There was no shower there, so we took turns, one of us going off at a time to boil water in the electric kettle, fill a bucket, and wipe down with our towels on the top floor where the toilets worked.

In the bathroom mirror, my body was leaner than when I left New Brunswick. I'd been getting more exercise and also eating a little less and a little healthier. Since Tim was vegan, we stopped for cheap veggie burgers at chip shops when travelling between squats. I had scrapes on my knees, shins, and elbows from climbing banisters, walls, and even trees when drunk. Some of the injuries I saw for the first time since I last showered. My hips and shoulders were softly bruised from sleeping on hard surfaces or worn out cushions. The hot towel turning cold as it wiped across my skin felt good on my sore muscles. In the mirror, I looked spent, but I felt the opposite.

On the last morning of Palestine Solidarity events earlier that day, I had been helping pack things up when Issac gathered everyone upstairs for a gratitude circle here, where I was standing near the bathrooms. The final ritual of the two weeks involved going around the circle and saying what everyone was thankful for. The only two events I attended, the doctor's talk and a question and answer with a Palestinian refugee who told us his parents' story of fleeing to Jordan, were emotionally heavy. Issac's idea behind the gathering was to help us move forward with a renewed sense of self and purpose, he said.

Issac said he was thankful for the turnout, for the success, for everyone who came.

Tim wasn't around that morning. He had gone to get his backpack from Barbican squat.

I confessed that I hadn't spent much time at the events, but I was thankful for everyone I had met there, and also in the last two weeks, my first time in London.

For that night only, with Tim and Dan, it was our own squat. Clean, dressed in new shirts from our bags, and drunk, we sat in the squat's brightly-lit, wide-open office floor under its incandescent bulbs, and we played with toy building blocks left behind from the Palestine Solidarity Squat's activity bin.

"What should we call the place?" Dan asked, building a tower from the bricks.

Every squat had a name. We thought it was respectful to use a different one now that the protest events had ended. We didn't want to affect its reputation.

We decided on Gray's Inn, the name of the street. And if we were only squatting for a while, until the bailiffs stormed in, why not use the squat like a free inn, we wondered by the glow of our beers. Why not invite others the way Rachel and Sean's BeWelcome house did? We didn't know how long the squat would last, so we decided to fill its floors if we could. And wasn't that one of the points of life anyway? I asked, a little drunk.

Tim laughed at the luck of it all, the three of us sitting on the empty office floor with our beer and children's toys.

"I bet you as a kid never thought you'd grow up and play with blocks inside an abandoned building," Dan said.

"I dreamed of it," I joked.

The next day, we sent out texts and online messages, and we opened the plywood door of Gray's Inn squat to anyone in London who needed a floor to sleep on.

Chapter 5

The eviction papers didn't come that first week, and the party didn't stop for seven days and seven nights. My memory of that week was a collage of friendly faces and blurry photographs all through the six floors of Gray's Inn. Before the upper floors were taken up with bedrooms, when they were open and empty wall to wall, we invented games involving handstands and throwing coins at cans. Downstairs we sat in circles, passing a spliff and debating politics, like whether it was ethical to pay taxes to a government that both provided healthcare and bombed Iraq. Almost everyone I had met in London came by for one night or another, and we filled the floors with squatters.

The ground level where we could hear the front door became our common room, and the furniture the activists left us was soon stained with spilled cider and cigarette ash. We partied in shifts there. Always people were on the four couches: sometimes one person to each couch in regal conversation, sometimes two dozen drunks stuffed hip-to-hip, lying on each other's laps, and perching on top of the armrests. As some partiers left or went to bed, others took their spot. We argued and we laughed at each others' jokes and jests louder than the music playing on our AM radio, the only music we had, tuned to a 24-hour pirate jungle/drum'n'bass station.

Bertie's apartment block squat and the Fire Station squat where Research Chemical Freddie lived both had impending evictions, so Bertie and Freddie began living with us while still staying at their other squats. They decided to stick with whichever squat outlasted the other. Australian James and Russian Irina didn't move in, but they spent nearly the whole week with us anyway. James, always dressed in the

same punk clothes, only returned to his squat once, when he needed to change. Irina caught the tube home once a day and returned, freshly showered and laundered, 12 hours later. Niko dropped by every day or two, often making hash runs. Even Rachel and Sean visited us one night from their BeWelcome house and brought roommates and travellers with them.

The more people who came to Gray's Inn, the easier it was to leave the squat on an errand, and the more likely it became that maybe, just maybe, we could resist an eviction. You could never leave a squat unattended. Our occupants' right to the vacant premise depended on it being vacant and us occupying it. If the squatters weren't home and the owner entered the building, the squatters lose all rights to it. If one of us was there, then the owner has no more right to enter unannounced than any landlord. We couldn't go out to visit our friends, so we invited them to visit us. We threw a squat opening party, and the party just never stopped.

Of the new squatters who joined us, Erika and Lyle were the two who kept the party going the most. Dan met them looking for a crew to join at the Advisory Service for Squatters. They'd never met before then and were perfectly opposite. Erika was a tall German with orange hair who had been squatting for three months. She shaved her hair like a monk in the kitchen once when it was too tangled to cut. Erika was ever present at the party, but lurking. She was still practising her English, and she got tired and silent after her second or third beer.

Lyle was a short Brit with a thick accent from Essex, and he was as talkative as traffic whenever he was awake. At one point, my brother and I joked that if anyone in the squat was an undercover cop, it was Lyle. He moved in with us, but he never set up a bed. He left for a day at a time and then came back with eight tall beers to share. In

truth, we would have actually suspected it if the rest of the time Lyle wasn't the most slurred-faced drunk in the room. He would nap, drunk on the couch, while everyone was arguing about the American election at 2 in the afternoon, and then he would leave during the party, still drunk. We weren't sure if he'd be gone again for a day or just twenty minutes before he would reappear from the shop again with another bag full of beer. When he was gone overnight once, he said he stayed at his dad's, but they didn't get along, so had to leave. Lyle always brought two four-pack rings of beer to share whenever he came from the shop, and he probably paid for one in every four beers I drank that week.

I answered a knock on the door the second night. It was the woman in a yellow reflective vest who lived out of her electric scooter and who had stayed on the main level of the squat before we moved in.

"I was wondering if I could stay tonight like before?" she asked.

"Of course!" I said, and held the door for her while she rolled over the threshold bumps. She sat with us while we drank and smoked, and we talked about getting her upstairs to a quiet room, but it wasn't possible. The elevator didn't work, Research Chemical Freddie was sure. He had locked it and kept the key so no one hurt themselves in the empty shaft. I wasn't sure why he had the key.

I brought the woman in the scooter a sandwich from the kitchen, and she dozed off sitting up in a corner of the room. When I woke up in the morning, she was gone, and she never came back.

The party kept going. Some of guests we brought from other parties. With Dan, Erika, and Lyle drinking and watching the squat, my brother, Irina, and I went out to a

nearby BeWelcome bar social one night. Another night, we went with Bertie to a squat art show. Each night, we invited everyone back to an afterparty with us at Gray's Inn.

At the squat art show, Bertie had bought a thick bud of Thai marijuana wrapped in red thread, and I gave him 5 pounds when we got back to roll a Canadian joint with no tobacco. I was drunk, and I don't remember who was sitting around us in the back corner away from the couches. Tim was already passed out upstairs. I remember that sticky brown and green herb crumbled across the long white rolling paper.

It burned clean and steamy between my fingers. It smelled familiar, skunky, and tasted like hot tea. Bertie motioned for me to pass it back to him when I was done. He didn't have much to share. He wanted to split it between the two of us.

"What you got there, boys?" Lyle leaned on the radiator between us. Bertie made eyes at me. Lyle had smelled it.

I filled my lungs with another strong toke, and passed the joint to Lyle. He had shared more than enough beer with us.

I exhaled a wispy cloud that was much thinner than spliff smoke without tobacco burning inside. I missed this taste.

The room got quieter, its walls more insulated, as I listened to conversations on opposite sides of the couches in front of us.

James's green half-shaved hair was in a ponytail. He was talking to a curly-haired man with horn-rimmed glasses from the squat artshow. I didn't know if the man was a squatter or not. I'd never met him before. I looked at James's cracked vegan leather boots. He'd had them since he was in uni in Australia, he had told me. The room was getting darker around him. Or maybe I was squinting.

I looked at Lyle's boot's. He was talking to me. He was telling me about Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven". He wore trendy black leather boots with military stitching. I was so high, I was seeing them through 80s polaroid lenses. They looked like military-grade goose-stepping boots, and then muddy boots running through a juggle. They perched on the smeared brown carpet. They perched on polished wooden shelves at expensive clothing stores. They were oiled cow skin that used to moo in grass fields. They were raw leather being fed through an industrial sewing machine by calloused hands. "Nevermore," he said. What? He was telling me "The Raven" was about delirium tremors. The DTs. That was why he was at his dad's, he said. To detox. It was bad, he said. He was shaking, holding out his beer, or maybe he was showing me the shaking as he described coming down from alcohol, like the spectre at the end of the bed, he said. "I've seen it. Nevermore," he said, and then he took a sip from his beer. He was quoting the poem.

The man in the horn-rimmed glasses was getting in an argument with James. "How is this activism?" the man asked in a polite British accent. "What's all this doing to fight climate change?"

"Come on," James said. "This is a party. Isn't that enough? I've D-locked myself to fracking rigs in Lancashire. We're not tossers on their second yacht. We're not tearing up the earth. We're just sitting on it. This is a party."

"You just said this was a community housing project. Like this squat is doing something good. You're just drinking and pissing off developers." The man's arms were crossed over his thin navy sweater. I could see a hole in its knitted elbow.

"Hey. Hey. Hey." Lyle stood up from the radiator. He was so drunk, it looked like he was waving to push through a curtain that wasn't in front of him.

The man on the couch tried not to look at Lyle's damp red face.

Lyle pointed with his beer can as he spoke to them. "When the Prussian police were watching Karl, they reported—they said, Karl Marx doesn't look like a threat, you know? He just drinks and idles and sleeps in a soiled bed. Karl Marx! So just let the kids have their fun, you know?"

The man in the horn-rimmed glasses left the room to another circle of people in our front lobby.

I thought of the woman in the yellow vest who slept upright in her scooter over there, in the corner. All her belongings were in the front cart and a backpack she kept on the back of the seat. Where was she sleeping tonight?

&

Bringing the parties to us saved Tim and I a lot of money, and we found other ways to save too. I pulled out the calculator on my phone at the shop and crunched the alcohol units per £ cost on everything they sold.

"Put that away," Tim said.

Research Chemical Freddie was with us. "That's smart," he said in his nasal voice. "Check these over here."

The winner was a 3 litre plastic soda bottle of 7.5% cider for £3.99. It was more than one-night's worth of cider for the equivalent of 40 minutes work for me.

Cider is full of sugar, Tim warned against it.

"Actually, it's got artificial sweeteners because it's onion cider," Freddie pronounced. He said it was cheap because UK law reduced taxes on beverages of less

than 7.5% made with up to some percentage of apples, like the nation's cherished cider brands. Some corporation, White Heart or Black Card or something, figured they could hit those limits, make the rest of the cider out of onions, and then sweeten it artificially. They qualified for the tax break and competed to sell to people like me who cared more about the budget than the flavour of onions. I don't know where Freddie heard the theory.

"You can probably taste the layers," I said, grabbing a bottle.

Nearly all of our food at Gray's Inn was free. The tiny office kitchen with only a microwave and a sink wasn't good for cooking, but there were two large tables where we laid out and sorted all the sushi, sandwiches, pastries, and bread we collected from bins around central London. Asta, the Northern European who helped out at the Palestine Solidarity events, didn't stay with us, but when he cycled by on the first day to check in, I asked him to show me how he had gotten the sushi for the squat events.

There were four take-out sushi restaurants within walking distance. The shops belonged to two chains, and all their sushi was plated and prepared overnight to sit in display fridges all day waiting for rushed accountants, advertisers, lawyers, and clerks on their lunch. Our area of the city fell silent overnight, and each shop closed at about the same time, based on the schedules of the offices around them. At 9:30pm, it was exactly as Asta described. I could go for a twenty minute walk past two sushi shops and collect their bright green bin bags set out on the street with that day's unsold lunch packages and pre-wrapped sushi.

Asta told me where to find a pre-prepared sandwich place and a bakery as well. The sandwich shop was behind a metal gate that I could reach through with my long

arms to pick their bin and withdraw the plastic-wrapped baguette sandwiches and salads packs that hadn't sold that day.

The chain bakery tossed out pies, pastries, and premium loaves of bread, but I had more competition. Every night, three or four older men in windbreakers sat silently waiting for the trash. I don't know where they came from or where they returned to. They never spoke, and they swooped in like ravens to secret away the sweets as soon as the bags appeared. If you were there when they were, you needed to find a spot to reach past them into a bag. If you started into a bag before them, their hands would start reaching into the same bag next to your hands, peeling aside baking paper and pushing aside loaves of bread to be first to find a pre-made cheesecake in a plastic shell. If you came after them, they always left behind a half bag or more of bread and buns—the same buns Zuzanna had served us at the Barbican squat.

We bought some food. We bought coffee, a hangover necessity, and made it cowboy style in mugs by pouring boiling water over unfiltered grits and letting them settle to the bottom. My brother bought oil, spices, and hot sauce to go with the ten kilo bag of onions left by the activists, and he perfected caramelizing them in the microwave to spread on the artisanal bread from the bakery bags. I think he invented the recipe once at another squat while stoned.

Our shelter and our food were taken care of for now. Our only expenses were cider and hash. I might not run out of money after all. The less we spent partying, the longer we could do it. We got the internet working in the squat too. I could connect with my little laptop. And that's how we found a way to get free alcohol.

&

BT, the British Telecom company, was in the process of converting disused telephone booths and the home routers of people who didn't pay enough for "ultra-fast service" into urban WiFi hubs. If you were within a hundred feet of an upgraded BT booth, or maybe catching the signal bounced off a brick wall, you could access their paid login page. Someone, I didn't know who, had their login information leaked to squatters. Talyor219 provided weak, choppy internet to half the squatters in London. Too slow even for song streaming, the BT connection was really only good for checking email and text-based social media.

We used it to sign the squat up to host on BeWelcome. Tim and I figured we could use BeWelcome later to find hosts while travelling Europe, and in the meantime, we could offer up the top floor of Gray's Inn to anyone who needed it. The website encouraged helping strangers with no exchange of money. The idea was to pay it forward. And everyone who used the website were the type of travellers who preferred chatting with new friends instead of retiring to an expensive room at the end of a long day, or it was all they could afford.

We started to get 3-4 requests per day from people looking to stay with us in central London. To cut them down, my brother wrote a warning on our profile:

NOTE! this is a squat! we have a big room with space on the floor for travellers, but if you stay here, you might find yourself sleeping in a room with 12 other people, showering with a bucket, being woken up at 6am due to an eviction, being woken up at 6am with vodka, or being woken up at 6am by people on drugs offering you breakfast. you may arrive during a quiet night of smoking spliffs and reading, or you may arrive

during a 30 person party drinking and dancing. you are welcome, but you have been warned! p.s. if you bring us vodka or beer I will love you forever...

That last statement got us blackout drunk as soon as the first guests arrived. BeWelcome was 100% free. That was its ethos. But bringing gifts for hosts was also common. More than half the travellers who came to stay started the night by cracking open a bottle of vodka for Tim and me.

I imagined what the BeWelcome guests must have felt when they knocked on the squat door at Gray's Inn. I accepted every request we received, I copy/pasted Tim's warning, and I gave them the necessary info: 2-- *Gray's Inn Road. Knock on the plywood door. Say you are Ed's BeWelcome guests. Text me the day before at +44----- to make sure we haven't been evicted yet.*

Whoever answered the door—it might be me, it could be Australian James with his half-shaved head, or it could be another one of our other BeWelcome guests—would give you a tour of the squat. You would step from the sidewalk, where well-dressed office workers hurried past, into the first floor of the squat. It could be empty, or it might be full with 20 artists, punks, and travellers cheering and toasting your arrival. The walls were pinned and taped with papers, notes, and flyers—many of them left from the Palestine Solidarity Squat, others info-zines produced by the Advisory Service for Squatters we'd picked up there. In between was writing on the wall in marker and pen. I had written the timeline of the local restaurants' discarded food skips as well as their addresses, and someone had drawn a cartoon face with a speech bubble that said "Remember to *Skip* your dinner, kids!" The room might be clean. Many of us tidied while hungover, tossing half-full beers untouched because of the spliff butts inside and collecting coffee mugs drunk down to the grit in the bottom. Or the room might be filled

with the carrier bags, sushi snack wrappers, plastic beer rings, and the makeshift ashtrays of the afterparty.

The basement had a carpeted kitchen, but it was kept cleaner than anywhere else. Recovered sushi was labelled with the date and tossed the next day. I did it sometimes. James did it other times. BeWelcome guests could help us by washing dishes with cold water. The basement had a long dingy hall where partiers sat chatting when they wanted to hide from the sun, and there were two different bathrooms, their gender labels torn off. Here and the top floor were the only bathrooms. And take as much food as you want. We replenished it almost daily.

The next three floors up were where squatters slept. Through the stairwell doors, you could see makeshift privacy walls constructed from blankets and pallets that separated the office space into bedrooms like children's forts, but these floors were off limits to an extent. You could visit someone's sleeping space with their permission.

On the top floor with the other set of bathrooms was a long hall open to windows at both ends. Here, there was nothing taller than a pillow on the floor or a person kneeling to pack their bag. From one end to the other were lined up anywhere from five to fifteen mattresses and sleeping mats used by BeWelcome guests and other visitors. Someone here will help you find your place.

&

On the longest day of year, the start of summer, I found out what the drug MDMA felt like. The night we danced with Zuzanna and Bertie, I was too drunk and

had taken only a little. This time I tasted the drug's peculiar saltiness, anticipation, and attention.

James brought a gram of MDMA for himself and four grams to sell. Each bundle of powdery crystals was folded into paper envelopes made out of advertisements for real estate in London. He sold two grams to other squatters who stopped by in the afternoon, and he began sharing the rest. The midsummer sun was still high in the early evening. Tim, Erika, Irina, and I were nursing hangovers on the second floor when James offered us lines.

I'm not sure if it was Tim's or James's idea to start with MDMA, but Erika was interested in anything offered for free. Irina had done the drug only once before, she said, but she felt safe around us to do it again. I was more nervous than her, I think, but I didn't say so. It was my first time snorting any drug.

I had read that MDMA was only risky to people who didn't stay hydrated while partying on it. It made you heat up, sweat, and want to dance. The UK government's former drug tsar had published a paper showing that, statistically, partying on MDMA was safer than horseback riding. That made it sound like daring fun either way. The most popular ingredient in ecstasy pills, MDMA had been called both a party drug and an honesty drug. Apparently couples used it together in boutique relationship counselling. Maybe I was nervous this time because I was sober.

James tapped out a small amount of the yellow rocks from the makeshift envelope and crushed it against *Neuromancer*, one of Tim's novels, using the back of a library card. It seemed he thought less than a quarter of a gram was a good amount to start. Licking his lips for concentration, he used the card to separate the now powdery golden crystals into five lines, one for each of us.

In her accented English, Erika said MDMA was popular in Hamburg, where they called it Molly, and she leaned in to go first. Then James held back his loose hair in one hand and leaned in, holding both the short straw and his nose in his other hand. Irina asked the best way to hold the straw, and James explained while Tim took his turn.

When it came to my turn, I fumbled to tie my hair back in a ponytail. James passed me a fresh piece of straw. I exhaled slowly to empty my lungs, leaned in with the straw, and drew the sharp line into my brain.

It stung. I was not the only one whose eyes were watering. I sniffed up the drip from my sinuses, and tasted salt in the back of my throat. My vision blurred a shift from the tear, and everyone sitting around me were softer versions of themselves. James was looking at me, his eyes too were watering. “Yeah, it stings a bit. I didn’t want to say anything until you had tried it.”

I was about to say that I preferred swallowing it, but actually, the sting wasn’t that bad, now that I thought about it, and my vision was already clearing up. We sat on the carpet between the two mattresses looking at each other in the room with wide white walls, and we saw our friends with wrinkles and scrapes and bruises from their own lives, feeling the same thing in their noses together at that very moment on the longest day of the year.

I tried to pay James for some of what we’d taken. But he said no. Tim and I already shared so much, he said. He was high too.

We talked for an hour, sometimes in the circle, sometimes one-on-one across the circle. With the drug tingling in our muscles, we clenched our jaws and stretched our fingers. Irina gave us gum to chew. “This will help,” she said.

Erika crossed the circle to speak with me. It was more full sentences than I had ever heard her say. She struggled with English, she said, and she wanted to thank us for having her in the squat. She had been in two places in London so far, she said, and none of them were as nice as this place. My brother and I were so welcoming and friendly, she said, and she's been able to practise her English more than ever before, and she wanted to know if she could stay in our squat as long as it lasted.

Of course. This is your squat too, I said.

Tim told us about his court case. It was only the second time he had mentioned it. He said he had been thinking about it the whole time. He said it hung from his neck like a cement collar. Maybe he'd get released without enough evidence, that's what his lawyer said, or maybe he'd have to pay a fine and do community service, or maybe he'd go to prison. Until he found out, the court date in August was a tether on his collar that prevented him from going too far from that courthouse. He needed to be in London on that exact date in August, and maybe he'd be stuck here afterwards. He wanted to go travelling with me, he said, but he had to think about his court case and that date. Tim was a person who lived without a calendar, but he had one now. He'd never told me the date before. And until that date, he said, he had to be careful just living his life. What if he got searched with a spliff roach in his wallet? Or caught riding the tube without fare? Maybe even just written into a police report while squatting? Anything added to his record now could get brought up at his hearing. Even if he was found innocent, released for doing nothing wrong, this case hung over him as punishment for living outside of what was normal.

I said, we can travel anyway, if you want, and come back for your case.

James broke out the book and more lines when we started to feel the conversation slow. I had poured cider in a smaller bottle, but I had been talking and listening so much before, I forgot to drink any, and my mouth was parched, so I drank just a little.

It felt like the warmest day of the summer so far. The sun was streaming down on London's brick streets, and heating up the squat from below. James, Tim, and Erika went upstairs to open all the windows on the top floor and create a cross breeze. Irina and I, in conversation, stayed facing each other, kneeling on my mattress.

She was failing out of her pre-law degree, she told me, and she wasn't even certain she wanted to do it, and she might not go back to school in September, but her status in the UK depended on being a student, she said. Her dad had been sending her to school in London since she was 6, and she hadn't lived in Russia in almost fifteen years now, not even for summers. She could barely speak Russian anymore, she said. But if she wasn't a student in the UK, her status was void, and she would have to go back. And this year she discovered she's bisexual, and that doesn't even exist in her hometown in Russia. She couldn't be herself or date who she wanted to date where her father lived, she said, and she either had to study something she didn't want to study or go back and live the way everyone else did, get a husband, and become a baby factory. She giggled at the silliness of her last word. "Baby factory."

Her laugh spread to me. I told her I felt for her. I told her I felt so lucky to be able to come here and bounce around from squat to squat with Tim. I told her this might be my ideal way to live because I only ever wanted to work part-time my entire life. Work less, live more, I joked.

I told her I had tried working a full-time job, but my depression was too heavy for me. I told her about my depression. And I couldn't stay in the job because I didn't feel like myself in those days. I had no direction. I felt like I was walking around with horse blinders on wherever I went, and since I barely saw anything, I didn't go anywhere, and I just became my bed and my job, and in between, where a person had been, nothing.

We sat in the silence of our chewing gum, holding hands in the summer evening. There was a sound like slamming furniture upstairs. We turned to look at the stairwell.

"Let's check on the others," I said. My brother and I hadn't gotten a chance to talk.

On the top floor, a strange light was pouring in. The ceiling tiles had been ripped down, and a metal ladder extended from a trap door in the roof down to the squat floor.

"WE HAVE A ROOF?" I demanded to know, yelling up through the hole.

"WE HAVE A ROOF!" everyone began shouting excitedly.

James, Tim, and Erika had to get onto the roof to see the sunset, they said. The only way was climbing out a window and along a 12 inch ledge past the dormer windows. Five floors below was the city. They decided that method was too dangerous in their present condition. Erika thought there must be another way up, and they began tearing down ceiling tiles to find it.

Hidden above the bland office ceiling, there was a hatch. Perched on James's shoulder, my brother grabbed the cord and yanked it down. The ladder came with it, almost hitting James, and they discovered the roof.

We climbed up. Dan and a guest I'd never met before came running upstairs while we were there. They climbed up too, and we all stood high above central London.

Not much taller than the Barbican squat, the view was similar, all competing brick and tar rooftops and, in the distance, the splintered-glass Shard. However, from Gray's Inn we could see clear to the west where a row of puffy clouds, the only ones in the large orange sky, were about to conceal the setting sun.

"Someone go get some cider," Tim said. "There's a hippy party up at Stonehenge right now. We're about to watch the same sun set into the shortest night of the year." And we did.

&

James warned me about a "comedown" from MDMA.

Tim didn't believe him. "I always feel fine," he said.

James shrugged. Some people might not. "It's worse for people with mental illness," he said. They might feel crappy for the next day. Maybe two. Not physically crappy, like an alcohol hangover, but mentally crappy, like you spent all your good times that night and there was nothing left.

He was right.

I felt like a shell of myself that second day of summer. I went through the motions, but when I smiled, it was to reassure others. I didn't feel it.

I hadn't drunk much the night before. I didn't have nausea or a headache. We had taken lines of MDMA twice more that night, and I didn't drink more than one can's worth of cider poured from my plastic bottle, but still I felt it.

I decided I shouldn't take so much MDMA next time, if there was a next time.

I escaped the non-feeling in my core the next night by drinking again, and my brother and I had our first fight.

&

To anyone watching our fight—and there were at least five people—it probably wasn't a fight. We were brothers after all. They didn't know he was a hemophiliac.

It started because my brother wanted me to top up his cider with my own. Our stash of plastic-bottled cider was one floor up, and he asked me to share my drink, to pour it half into his empty glass, so he didn't have to go get a refill.

I refused. He always wanted more cider. He could get his own.

He insisted. He shifted forward on the couch and, as a joke, leaned on me and reached to take my cider and pour it himself.

I didn't take it as a joke, and I held on to my drink, also in his hand now.

He leaned more, pressing his back and shoulder into me, and he began laying on me with his weight, the stronger brother.

But I, no longer smallest, held back my cider and put him in a headlock.

We flailed on the couch.

We didn't punch each other or try to hurt each other, but we pushed back, trying to prove which of us was stronger: me, holding the headlock and the cider out of his reach; or him, pinning me with his back against the couch and pushing against both headlock and cider until one gave. Straining, not escalating. A game of submission. Snorting with exertion, not giving in to the other.

Lyle tried to tell a joke to lighten the mood. He and his older brothers used to fight like that all the time, he said.

I released Tim's headlock and gave him the cider simultaneously. I turned it into a hug.

He accepted, pouring himself a glass from my drink.

&

I lay awake on my mattress as the sky lightened outside. Tim snored on his mattress across from mine. I had gone to bed early and slept through the evening. The sounds of people downstairs had been replaced by the quiet rumble of passing buses coming through our open window with the breeze. The city smelled different in the morning: cold and clean.

Gray's Inn was silent now. I couldn't hear shouts or footsteps on the stairs like I had for the past seven days. In my shorts, I got up to check on the party.

The lights were still on in the main room. Dan had curled his long legs up to his chest to sleep like a six-foot infant in the high-backed chair. Lyle was upright on the couch, snoring, with a half-full beer in his hand. I set the beer on the table and I pushed him over to sleep sideways in case he vomited.

I switched off the incandescent lights, and I tiptoed back upstairs, putting the party to bed for the first time in a week.

Laying on my mattress, listening to the sounds of the city before the day began, I heard a banging on the front door. It was Lidija from Barbican squat. They had just been served eviction papers.

Chapter 6

“First Weeks of Summer Break Record Heat,” Tim read from London’s biggest free paper, paid for by real estate developers in the city. The *Evil Slander*, Tim’s friends called it. He was wearing a sleeveless top and sitting in the open window of our bedroom floor, his back to the street below. “But no mention of global warming,” he concluded. “Don’t worry about the cause, why not just drive off to the coast?”

As the summer heated the streets of London, Gray’s Inn squat continued to grow, its walls covered in more paint and poems, its friendly faces more plentiful. The building was just going to get torn down after us, so Tim invited artists he knew and ones we had just met to paint the walls. A Spanish graffiti artist who had been in Madrid during the Indignados movement painted protesters in gas masks throwing Molotov cocktails on the second floor near our beds. Once we had leftover paint and markers, everyone added their own art or words to the wall. The stairwell became a path of tulips growing up five flights that Erika painted, and the ground floor was a riot of slogans like *Proper Tea is Theft* on a drawing of a cup of tea or *Kropotkin was Right!* in red marker. In big swirly letters was written *If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution*.

At the far end of the ground level, on the wall, Irina had traced the standing silhouettes of two tall brothers. I remembered the tracing. And someone else had painted one in ocean blue and the other in psychedelic orange.

Gray’s Inn became a hub of squatters, drunks, artists, and activists dropping by for sushi in the afternoon, coming to pre-drink in the evening before moving on, or congregating late past dawn until the next parties arrived. We had so many BeWelcome

guests that month that I forgot half their faces, and it wasn't just because of the vodka. Some visitors stopped by for only part of an evening. Some came for a night and stayed for a week. Some asked to stay for a week but left after only a night. Some moved in and became friends of mine to this day.

The BeWelcome guests came from all over. There was the New Zealander who worked for an animation company and produced music videos; he didn't talk much, but he had his own style of black and white cartoon characters and filled the squat walls with life-size characters. Two sisters from Peru brought a strange smoking plant, a derivative of weed, Black Mamba they called it; it made three people throw up with no other effect. I never even got to try it. There was the 17-year-old Welsh girl with old self-arm scars on her arms and her Polish boyfriend, the 24-year old Spider, who had an online photo account of him climbing to the tops of buildings in Poland; he left one night to climb the looming Shard skyscraper before construction finished. There was the British Pakistani in an expensive cow-hide jacket who was in London on a work trip, for what, he never said; he never stayed overnight, but he came back three nights in a row with over 50 quid worth of crisps, chocolates, and gummy bears for everyone. There was the young Brazilian with a phobia of speaking but with a powerful singing voice who captivated us all at an open mic night at a community-run reggae club in Hackney. A middle-aged Canadian woman with designer-brand suitcases on a break from teaching English in Laos changed her trip to stay an extra week with us. There was the older Nigerian man in London for a job interview who had the nicest looking suit of anyone here, but who had slept on a park bench the night before because he couldn't afford a hostel in the city. There were the French fire-spinners, Julien and Julie, a short, tanned

couple, who had come to London with the summer heat to earn money busking at night; they stayed almost the whole month.

Gray's Inn could be evicted any day, but after two weeks, we were no longer worried about an interim possession order. We could try to resist an eviction. The more days that passed, the more we forgot about it. While checking BeWelcome messages on my laptop, I emailed my publishing contacts back in Canada. I told them I was getting set up over here and asked if there was any online work I could do.

Eating sushi breakfast on the roof one hungover morning with Dan and the firespinners Julien and Julie, Tim asked me if I really did want to go hitchhiking through Europe that summer.

The last time hitchhiking, it ended in a perpetual rain that chased us back to London. For this coming trip, I had bought bus tickets for Tim and I to get from London to Amsterdam. We didn't have to go. It was just to show the border guard to get into the UK. But now the date was approaching. Maybe we could use BeWelcome in Amsterdam, get stoned on Dutch weed, and party there for a week if we found the right host. And then we could hitchhike on to visit our cousin Rich in Budapest.

Our cousin was ten years older than me. I hadn't seen him since he was a teenager when my brother and I were young enough to play with toy plastic swords. He was half British-Canadian and half Italian, where the other side of his family lived. He and a Hungarian had married after university, and they lived together in Budapest. We could stay at Rich's for a visit if we wanted to see our older cousin, but we didn't know how much we'd have in common with him. Either way, we had the chance to travel around Europe for a bit and come back to London in time for Tim's trial.

Or we could stay in London as long as Gray's Inn lasted—the Last Days of Rome, Lidija called it in her sing-song voice. Tim's court case was coming up in August anyway. Here, we had free food, as much as we could eat. And the BeWelcome guests kept coming bearing vodka and beer.

&

The only time that my brother and I left Gray's Inn just the two of us—without a group of others going to party or find an adventure—we went to Sofi's so I could get a tattoo.

Sofi was an old squatmate of Tim's who I only ever met twice: once, that night, when I got my tattoo, and then, later, the first time I smoked DMT.

Her boyfriend Leo was once London's most famous squatter—according to the columns in the *Evil Slander*. He earned the label for giving interviews to the rightwing press in exchange for cash during the political push to outlaw residential squatting. He invited their cameras into his squats. He was young and tech-savvy. He told them he knew every trick to scam income benefits and gave interviews in his Estonian accent. He became the job-stealer/moocher boogiemán that the ad-rags wanted for their conservative readers, and he wasn't popular among squatters either on account of his tone deaf interviews.

Sofi and Leo weren't squatting anymore when Tim took me to meet them. They were renting a small one-bed flat in North London near Seven Sisters. Sofi worked full-time in a cafe to pay their rent, and Leo sold drugs online.

Sofi invited us over for dinner and tattoos. She had flown her friend Gabriela, a tattoo artist, up from Spain to finish her traditional sailor-style chest piece. Flying her friend up was cheaper for Sofi than going to a local tattoo studio, and the whole trip was a working holiday for Gabriela. Sofi had offered Tim and I tattoos from Gabriela if we wanted. He couldn't think of anything to get, but I had an idea for myself.

It was raining lightly, and we passed children splashing in bright red and yellow coats on the quiet row of attached brick homes leading to Sofi's front door. It was the first time my brother was seeing Sofi's new place and their first time hanging out in a year. She welcomed us with tight hugs around the middle of our chests.

"Careful here," she motioned. She wore a low-cut shirt and had plastic wrap over two glistening swallows above her breasts. Sailors supposedly got a swallow tattoo for every 5,000 nautical miles they travelled, like the distance from London to Buenos Aires and back. She said that Tim had told her all about me.

"Likewise," I smiled. I'd heard about her more than once from Tim and our friends.

Sofi was like the squat mom of my brother's first place with Bertie and Lidija. None of them had squatted before. They met through online forums and decided to start. Sofi was an Argentinian with Spanish residency trying to save up money in the UK, but she couldn't afford to rent in the city.

My brother started squatting a year after he had dropped out of medical school. He was separating from his British wife and couldn't afford to live alone in London. Sofi was the one in the squat who hung up curtains out of blankets to keep out the London cold that first winter and made sure everyone had water when they were hungover.

“How do you like renting?” my brother asked.

She sat down in the makeshift tattoo station on the couch. “Well, I work—a lot. But the windows aren’t drafty, and I can just call the landlord if the taps leak, you know?”

At the sound of my brother’s voice, Leo poked his head around the hallway corner, mimicking a cartoon character—intentionally, I was sure. He shook a small bottle of cognac like a medieval alchemist.

“You don’t have to drink that,” Sofi said. “He’s just trying to empty them to make DMT pipes.”

Sofi did all the talking for Leo. He was making the drug DMT to sell online because it’s simple enough to do at home. He just smiled and nodded and crept away—again, like a cartoon character.

“Is he high right now?” I joked. I’d never smoked DMT before.

“No, Leo doesn’t take drugs. Just makes them,” she smiled and sighed. I could picture her stroking his hair while she spoke. “He doesn’t talk to strangers anymore. Honestly, I was surprised when he shook your hand. He has bad anxiety. And he’s a little strange, but he’s my strange.” She cooed that last bit loud enough for him to hear in the next room.

I didn’t understand him, but I understood well enough. I tried to give her an empathetic smile. In any random sample of squatters I had met, there seemed to be more people than usual with mental health issues.

To trade for the free tattoo, my brother and I brought the groceries to make zucchini lasagne for everyone. Sofi’s friend Gabriela spoke only Spanish with Sofi, so

the remaining three of us chatted about Tim and Sofi's first squat while we cooked and Gabriela's tattoo iron buzzed across Sofi's collar bone.

While we ate at the kitchen table, Leo ate a ready-meal from the freezer alone. He stayed in his room most of the night except when he came out again to pour us cognac from the brown glass shot bottles. The bottom of this brand had an indented shape ideal for puncturing with a hot nail and making a mouth piece to inhale vaporized DMT from the neck of the bottle. Leo didn't drink either, but he smiled as he topped up our cola glasses with cognac. He seemed to delight in the idea of getting us drunk.

He motioned and gave directions for me to roll the one-gallon glass jug of tree bark that he was using to extract his next batch of DMT. Then he left us alone. Sofi explained that they needed to shake each jug for 20 minutes twice a day while the plant bathed in a low-grade corrosive solution.

"How illegal is DMT?" I asked.

"The bark we get it out of is actually okay in some parts of the EU because it has a religious exemption for shamans. I have a friend who mails it to us. But DMT is a Class A substance the same as heroin. It's so stupid. It's a psychedelic," she explained. "That cognac you're drinking is more dangerous than hallucinogens."

I knew that DMT had a mythical status. It's the same ingredient used in South American ayahuasca ceremonies except extracted into a concentrate to be smoked. It's said to be able to introduce you to God—or at least produce the most powerful psychedelic effects of any recreational drug.

My brother liked quoting famous people facetiously in a way that you couldn't tell if he agreed with them or not. "Terrance Mckenna said that when you smoke DMT,

you can break through to a hidden dimension deep within the Earth—with machine elves.”

“OK there, bud,” I said more to Terrance Mckenna than to my brother.

Selling online wasn’t working out for Sofi and Leo. First they tried LSD: paper tabs of acid. It was Leo’s idea, but Sofi helped. They bought the crystals and measured out the paper blotter tabs. Their batch was too diluted. A guy bought 300 tabs from them, received them all in the mail, and then wanted his money back because it was too weak, he claimed. Neither Leo nor Sofi had tested it.

“You gave him his money back without even trying them?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course. What could we do? We don’t take drugs, and you want to get good seller ratings on the website. Now I can’t sell the rest of the batch.”

I was curious. “Why don’t you two do psychedelics?”

“Are you kidding? Look at Leo. He doesn’t need anything more. But me, I’ve just never done anything. I know they’re safe and everything and not addictive—that’s the only reason we sell them—but I just don’t want to leave my own head.”

I nodded as I thought about what she had said.

“I guess, that’s why I like them.”

“Well, we can’t sell the leftovers now until we test them.” She hesitated for a moment. “You can have some to try if you want.”

Our plan afterwards was to meet up with Dan at midnight to check out a new building he had spotted—in case Gray’s Inn got evicted. Climbing into abandoned buildings comes with a bit of legal risk. We couldn’t carry a bunch of tabs of acid.

“If they’re weak, let’s just get one each and take them now,” my brother said. It was a cognac idea. I had done LSD before in Canada. A microdose wasn’t much stronger than a beer.

“You’re welcome to,” Sofi said. “Have it free to test them for us.”

We swallowed the small pieces of paper with such little second thought that, by the time I was getting my tattoo from Gabriela, I’d forgotten we had taken the tabs.

Sofi had needed a break from her tattoo, and it was my turn on the couch. Gabriela changed out the surgical steel and the equipment while I figured out how to twist my arm for her to work on it.

I was getting an ampersand on the bottom of my wrist. I was big into metaphors then, and it represented a different kind of journey for me, one of connections. I had printed the & in a typing font, but I changed my mind. I should get it in my brother’s handwriting.

He grabbed one of Gabriela’s markers and scribbled out a few ampersands on a piece of scrap paper. I went with the first one he wrote. It was a bit sloppy, but it was honest.

The iron buzzed on my arm with the sensation of a scraping hunting knife. I could feel sweat forming on my cold forehead. The white painted walls swam with the patterns of invisible wall paper. Behind the buzzing of the machine, an FM radio spliced sparkly static into a broadcast of a Muse concert on the BBC. My brother, teasing me while I got the tattoo, was holding his keys, audibly buzzing from his lips like a tattoo iron himself, and turning the metal of the keys into the skin of my other arm. I looked at his large pupils.

“The acid,” I said, “I don’t think it’s weak.”

“Nope,” he cackled.

In hindsight, maybe the acid we took was weak, certainly less than the usual 100 mics in a tab. But combining one each with the cognac, we were in no shape to try to open a new squat that night.

“You’re supposed to be doing what later?” Sofi laughed at us. “I wouldn’t have given you anything if I had known!”

Our conversation bounced around different drug experiences and childhood stories while Gabriela finished up for the night on Sofi’s chest. My brother and I giggled back and forth under the scintillating walls like a two-actor play as we reminisced about growing up in rural New Brunswick. We told inside jokes that no other person in the world had any hope of knowing. Remember the snow quinzee with Dad? The incident with the bow and arrow? I still had a scar. Sofi followed along, asked questions, and translated some things for Gabriela. At one point, the four of us had tears in our eyes from laughing, but wet eyes seemed to come easiest to Sofi.

“You’re so lucky to have each other,” she said.

&

As eviction day came for the Barbican squat, they decided not to resist. The squat had been around since autumn, and they were ready to move on. “Last winter was like being outdoors,” Lidija said. She must have been more of an indoor cat, I teased her. They had huddled with electric heaters inside their makeshift tents in the tall brick and cement building.

They had two week's notice until the date, and most of the squatters there had already found someplace else to go. Some joined us. That was when Lidija moved in. Bertie had left for good one morning without saying goodbye. He texted Tim that he was going up to Scotland to visit his mum. Lidija used to squat with Tim and Bertie, and she took over his bed hidden behind cubical walls by suspending her collection of printed and painted blankets from the ceiling.

Little Niko found a spot one floor up with his new boyfriend. However, the Spanish brothers went back to Madrid, and Iwan rented a bunk somewhere with his car-counting coworkers in an over-stuffed flat. Why didn't they want to stay here?

"Gray's Inn is too much of a party squat," Lidija defended them with her hands on her hips.

Lidija wasn't as much of a partier as us either. Instead, she was the kind of artist who was always doing something creative out of nothing. Her gallery piece was all found materials. She collected the broken concrete in a wagon. While she was at Gray's Inn, she found a working instant-print camera in a nearby apartment's trash. It put scrapes in the photos, but she took one of me and one of Tim and photos of others in the squat, and she bent them and cracked them until the ink ran like an oil film across our faces in profile.

With so many people at the squat, it couldn't help but be a party. Gray's Inn was definitely that, but it was more. It was a community.

Even when we went out somewhere, we asked around to see who else wanted to go. On Saturdays, the Hari Krishna temple gave away free hot lentils and savoury rice, and we sat together in a park, hungover with our carton plates, eating holy vegan food. On two Thursdays, we went around to trendy art galleries in Shoreditch for what we

called Thirsty Thursdays when the gallery promoters opened new shows and gave away free sponsored wine, beer, or cocktails. We would return for third and fourth drinks at each gallery before jaunting to the next to critique the over-priced pop art on the walls. The gallery owners would take photographs of us and the crowds to help sell their exhibits and their image online.

Tim was like the pied-piper of our Gray's Inn expeditions. He had the mobile phone that got most of the notices of events and things to do nearby in the city. It was Tim who organized the trip to Thursday Thursdays. It was Tim who weekly rallied everyone together to go to the open-mic reggae night on Sundays where admission was free before 10pm, where you could smoke spliffs on their back patio, and where our Brazilian BeWelcome guest wowed us with her voice. He even posted on BeWelcome, inviting travellers staying with other hosts out to these events and then invited them back to Gray's Inn to party afterwards.

We would stop for beer, wine, and cider at the offie on our way back to the squat, and then we would roll more spliffs. Sometimes lines of MDMA were passed around by whoever could afford to share. Only a small amount for me, I said—like Zuzanna at the hashbar.

Sitting on the brightly lit office floor upstairs with walls scrawled with paintings, BeWelcome visitors who were in a squat for their first time demanded to know how it was justified. The building was being torn down, we said. There were more investment properties sitting empty in London that year than there were rough sleepers in need of roofs—not just rooms, but more entire empty properties than there were people sleeping outdoors. Properties just like this, six floors, empty, collecting value for investors.

Even if we could afford to rent, if we could work full-time jobs, “Is it more ethical to give your money to property investors or not to?” I challenged them.

Sitting on facing couches, sometimes sitting on laps when the seats were full, sometimes drawing diagrams on the walls, we argued and debated. We critiqued the system and imagined alternatives. Tim proposed the Free Party System while drunk and high.

“How does it work?” the British Pakistani who kept bringing crisps and candy asked.

“You’re *paid to party*,” Tim answered.

Who is?—“Everyone.”

Who pays them?—“The party does.”

“Alright,” the man thought he had pushed Tim’s alternative system into a corner. “Who makes the cider that gets drunk at the party then?”

“The party does,” Tim quipped.

“So you’re just working while partying then?”

“Exactly,” Tim said. “You’re *paid to party*.”

It was also Tim who took us to Anarchist Capture the Flag. ACF was a decentralized sport, but Issac, from the Palestine Solidarity Squat, was one of the organizers. Whoever showed up was sorted into two teams for the night by neon green and blue headbands that had to be displayed at all times. The game was simple. Grab the other team’s flag and bring it back to your flag without being tagged. It was the arena that made it anarchist. Every game was in a different private-public space in the city. One night it was Spitalfields Market, a luxury shopping square. Another, it was the Isle of Dogs, the second banking capital outside of the square mile. These were seemingly

public squares, but they were actually like outdoor shopping malls, their sidewalks and benches owned by corporations. The idea was to reclaim public space for a public use that wasn't just shopping. In practise, the game became dodging security guards as much as dodging the other team. The flag zones were on opposite ends of the district, the field of play was everything in between. We would run, panting, stopping to ask shoppers if they had seen anyone from the green team, dashing away from equally exhausted guards in reflective vests, and then turn to bound over a cement bench, and run some more, throwing our feet as far in front of us as possible to tag someone from the green team sneaking through our zone.

Archie came back to party with us for just one night after ACF. He was from Yorkshire and had grown up in a military family. He was my age, but he had stories of being a junior pledge at a Freemason's lodge after he was invited there as a cadet. "The Illuminati itself," he joked, "or at least some society of rich arseholes in England." We were drunk, and he had climbed up on the back of the couch to write something high on the wall above the rest of the graffiti. He was telling the story as he stood there because he couldn't think of what to write.

"They were these rich wankers in ten-thousand-pound suits, and they couldn't see it—I mean, I couldn't see it then either. The Freemason's lodge had silver finishings that were polished weekly and carpet that was steam-cleaned nightly." He was one of the people who did the polishing. "And in order to get in there, we had to walk past someone sleeping on the street on two sheets of cardboard in the same coat every bloody night." He held the marker in one hand. "You're an editor. How do you spell *decadince*?"

Watching him up on the wall standing on the back of the couch, my vision was swimming in cider. “Oh, I should know this.”

“Is it *deca-dence* with an *E*, or *deca-dance* with an *A*?”

They both sounded the same to me. Archie picked one and sat back down beside me to look up at what he had written in big black letters.

“Bloody hell, I think we got it wrong,” he laughed.

In all your decadance, people die.

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Sofi invited us back up to her place in North London for dinner and to try Leo’s first batch of DMT. The strongest known psychedelic. Tim and I were considering leaving for Budapest soon. It wasn’t an opportunity I could pass up.

Lying on my mattress in Gray’s Inn, I dreamed about Sofi and Leo’s homemade drug for a week after I tried it. The experience came back to me each night and disappeared again as the sleep amnesia wiped away my dreams. Whenever I began to doze off, the primary colours came pouring back and its indescribable flavour, like the ozone of burning microchips, invaded my mouth. I remember thinking, “How could I forget this?” but when I woke up in the morning, I never remembered what happened next. The most intense part, what I saw when I closed my eyes, was gone forever.

This time when we went up to North London, Lidija came with us. She used to squat with Sofi and Tim. A foot difference in height between them, Tim and Lidija made the tofu veg stir fry together in the kitchen while Sofi and I sat at her kitchen table.

When Leo wiggled a cognac bottle at us with glee this time, it was empty, but its neck was ready with DMT dust. He came closer and showed us the tiny amber flecks, a cross between brown sugar and something scraped off a bathtub with a fingernail, nestled into the steel-wool filament.

A reasonable hit of DMT is small—less than 1/20 of a gram of the drug. You say that you smoke it, but actually burning the substance kills the psychoactive ingredient. You have to place DMT on the end of a metal coil that you slowly heat as you inhale the steam coming off the dust.

“Let’s go into the bedroom to do it after supper,” Sofi said, to be away from the front door. Their room was new and tidy, only decorated by Leo’s cluttered computer desk and a pile of laundry on the floor. The walls were still white stippled concrete. Sofi took her laptop and sat cross-legged on the pile of laundry. Tim and Lidija sat on the bed. I sat on the floor near Leo’s desk.

Holding the lighter at the end of the loaded pipe, Leo motioned for me to lean in.

“Are you sure you want to go first?” Tim asked.

I shrugged. In my timidity, I inhaled slowly and softly, careful not to draw a breath that would pull the dust off the filter. Everyone in the room watched, sitting silently to give me the mental space to experience the drug. I leaned back and held the fumes in.

A smell like diesel exhaust was both its odour and the taste in my mouth. As I exhaled DMT vapour, the world began to shudder. The walls twitched into geometric shapes. Sofi’s typing on her laptop echoed in triplicate. My brother leaned towards my face and quickly drew back again, as if to test me, and he glowed and left large contrails in his retreat. The further away from me he moved, the lower the resolution his face

became. Beside him, Lidija's orange blouse was made up of white and red triangles like a jester's.

The walls reached a shaking crescendo, flipping patterns at high speeds. Everyone was looking at me with wriggling hair, multiple blinking eyes, glowing halos, and pixelated faces, and I thought: that's normal. But I couldn't decide why everyone was staring at me.

I remembered just then I'd taken a drug and was supposed to tell them what it was like. I opened my mouth, but the first word could not move my tongue. Silence. I had no idea what my facial expression was, but I managed to make a thumbs-up. My hands, the closest things to my face, pulsed yellow, pitted with black vibrating dots. My new tattoo glowed and wiggled on my skin.

And then everything returned to normal. I had taken a drug, and it was ending. The echos, the vibrating, and the light disappeared. When I could speak again, only an ambient dark golden glow remained, and I couldn't remember whether the light-bulbs in the room were so warm a colour before.

My brother went next. While he tripped, his eyes were shut. He made a whirring sound, like a baby playing airplane, drooled a little, and moved his hands slowly in front of himself. All he could say when he opened his eyes were swear words of amazement. When I asked him later what it was like, he said he remembered nothing other than "Woossssssssh!" and threw his hands toward my face to demonstrate the movement of the colours.

Lidija, who went last, sat in her trip for ten minutes and then could say almost nothing about the experience. "I don't have the words in English," she said, and she

whistled when she inhaled. “The world just broke. I don’t know if it was sci-fi or the future.”

“I think both of them took a much stronger hit than me,” I said.

Leo pointed the pipe to me then. It was the first and last time I ever heard him speak. “Lidija left some—ready?”

Why not? He held the flame to the pipe, and I inhaled deeply. I drew long and fully, filling my lungs with a hot Canadian bong rip, and I coughed everything out.

My cough echoed in triplicate. I began to choke. That was when I fell into the bright pit of my own head with the sound of a tattoo iron buzzzzzzzzzzing all the way down.

When I opened my eyes, the things I saw and the things I felt—the bathroom, the vomit, the paramedics, and the ambulance—were all hallucination. It was real to me, but it was meaningless. I was sitting on the floor next to Leo’s computer desk.

“How was it?” asked Tim.

Somewhere between my brain and my tongue, I still had difficulty making words.

“Thank you,” I said.

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“We could cancel with Rich if we wanted,” Tim said as we walked back from the shop with two bottles of onion cider. “I’m sure they’re busy getting ready for their trip.”

The date of our bus tickets was approaching. Tim and I weighed hitchhiking across Europe or staying at Gray's Inn. We had emailed our cousin Rich to work out details and tentatively told him we would visit. He said we would have to come straight from Amsterdam to Budapest to see him. His family was leaving on their own vacation less than a week after our bus tickets. I could have planned that better.

"There'll be no time to see Amsterdam if we want to go see them," I said.

"What about on the way back to London?" Tim proposed

We went forever back and forth making up our minds, acting like we would do both, telling the firespinners Julien and Julie that they could take our mattresses in Gray's Inn when we left and that also we might still be around to join them when they went busking at an upcoming concert in Hyde Park.

We hadn't thought Gray's Inn would last this long. Bertie was already gone. Australian James opened a new squat at an old church south of the river and visited us less. Research Chemical Freddie joined James there. "You know, I'm going to miss you Canadian brothers," he said in his nasally voice. "You can both come kip at mine when you get back into London."

Julien and Julie invited Tim and I to spend the winter with them on a beach near Granada in Spain. Perhaps. The thought was lovely—if I didn't run out of money by then. We had European travel limits to consider as well. My brother had a UK residence permit, but he wasn't a British citizen. We were both permitted only 90 days out of every 180 in the Schengen region of Europe. Maybe it could work though.

Sitting in the window in our bedroom to catch the BT internet on my laptop, I got an email from my former boss at the magazine. He was behind on a project deadline. He asked if I could copy edit a 10,000-word, two-part article on the partition of

Palestine. I had been hoping work like this would come up. He could pay me \$1.50 more per hour than the Canadian minimum wage for the work and deposit it into my bank account. It was a project that would be interesting, and it was a small raise.

That night, Tim was organizing everyone to go to a *proper* squat part, he said, emphasizing the word *proper* in a British accent that he didn't have. The party would be in an abandoned East London warehouse with three sound systems. Admission was 10 quid on the door, and the infoline with the address opened at 11pm. Freddie was coming over to go with us. Irina was visiting to come as well. Lyle, Dan, and even Erika were up for it, and so were half of our BeWelcome guests.

I felt the pull to go with them like a thirst in the back of my throat. I could go and start the work tomorrow... if I didn't get too hungover.

"I'm going to stay in and do this editing," I said. "I can open the door for you when you get back."

"Someone else will open the door," Tim said. "You haven't been to a *proper* squat party yet."

"I have to get this done."

And I did. Sitting in the window to check details on the BT Internet and then typing cross-legged on my mattress, I put in 20 hours of work over the weekend as Tim and others came and went through the room. I met the deadline in the middle of the afternoon on Sunday, poured a cider, and joined everyone downstairs.

&

“Do you think we should go to Budapest or not?” I asked Tim. He was the one with the court case next month. I was the one visiting, he said. What did I want to do?

The evening before the date printed on our bus tickets, we were still undecided about leaving London. Lidija and Irina hung out with us on our mattresses on the second floor. Irina said she could store anything we weren't taking with us at her apartment in case Gray's Inn got evicted while we were gone.

Tim pulled out the last of his MDMA. If we were crossing borders, we had to use it up, he suggested. It wasn't much. The four of us split it, swallowing all but a little in the first round.

We talked as the sun set, and my brother opened his last bottle of vodka that he had stored at the bottom of his backpack. We looked through Tim's novels, at what we would bring with to read and what he would store at Irina's.

Most of my bag would come. “I have this green pebble,” I said sorting my things. I told them about my best friend Sal back in Canada, how we used to get stoned and go to art openings together, how we still wrote emails to each other, and how this was one of her plant stones that she gave me at my going away party at her house to remember her by.

“That's beautiful,” Lidija said.

“Right, but we're trying to pack light,” Tim joked. “Don't put any rocks in your backpack from London, mate.”

Then he showed me something that he said I had to pack. He bought acid from Sofi when we last went up to North London to visit her and Leo. She had used an eyedropper to put the liquid LSD solution onto sugar cubes. Tim said we could put them in with our instant coffee packets in our food bag in case we got searched. They were

just normal sugar cubes, after all, unless you swallowed one. But I needed to carry it, he said, since he had his court case.

“OK, but you can carry them once we’re outside the UK.” I looked at the small bundle of sugar cubes. I was hesitant for more than one reason. “What if we stayed?” I said.

We had all our friends here. I might have more work coming. I could replenish my bank account if we stayed. Tim’s court case was in August. We would already have to hitchhike as soon as we got off the bus and skip past Amsterdam. By the time we got to Budapest, we’d only have a couple days to spend with our cousin Rich and his family before they went on vacation.

“Family is important,” Lidija said to me.

Tim’s phone rang. Long distance.

It was our mother. Rich was her nephew. “Your grandmother passed away,” she said.

Chapter 7

We were five hours ahead of Toronto where Grandma lived in a nursing home. Our mom was with her there when she died.

I was a couple of shots of vodka into the night, and I could feel the MDMA in my gut when the phone rang. Irina squeezed my hand while my brother spoke to our mother. He was asking how she was doing there alone. Her sisters hadn't arrived yet.

"Does Rich know yet?" I asked Mom after Tim passed me the phone.

Our cousin Rich and his family in Budapest were getting ready to visit Canada on their vacation next week.

"I spoke to him," Mom said. "Her remains are being cremated, so we are holding the ceremony until after Rich and the boys get into Toronto next week. You two are going to see him before he comes?" she asked.

"Yeah." It was decided. "We're crossing the channel tomorrow by bus, and we'll hitchhike from there." 1,400 kilometres. It was doable in a long day, maybe two, especially on the autobahn. Then we could spend three days at Rich's place with his family before they left.

"Take care of each other," Mom told me.

We packed in a daze figuring out what we needed to bring with the help of Lidija and Irina. I left my collared shirt behind, and I gave the green plant pebble to Lidija.

"This should stay in London," I said.

"It will be quiet at the squat without you two here," she said.

Tim packed his two-person tent and a small cook stove in his bag. I put the food satchel in mine with some groceries, instant coffee, and the sugar cubes. Lidija went down to the basement to get us skipped sandwiches for the trip. It made sense when hitchhiking to pack two or more days worth of food to avoid having to buy at overpriced gas stations. Getting off the highway into a grocery store took too much time. Each of our bags also held a 2L of water at the bottom. You never knew how long you might get stuck somewhere.

We hadn't slept before we had to walk to the tube station under a cold, pink dawn that made even the brown bricks of the office buildings look vibrant. The drug was still in my system. Irina came with us to the tube station and hugged us in tight goodbyes on the platform.

"I'll see you again before the school year starts," I told her. "You're going to do awesome next year," I said because I believed that she would.

By the time we exited the tube at Victoria Station, any sign of the sun was obscured behind London's hourless woollen sky. Rain drizzled down the bus windows all the way to Dover.

I had booked the discount bus tickets to visit our cousin on an essentially random date—whenever we could cross the channel and get a ride all the way to Amsterdam for cheap. It turned out to be the day after our grandmother died.

It was just so I'd have an onward trip to show the UK border guard when I had flown in. It's on the way into the UK that you have to be prepared, my brother said. The border on the way out is never a problem.

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“If you could live in any city in the world, but you wanted to stay close to family, where would you live?” my brother asked on the bus. Now that we were alone, which hadn’t happened often in London, Tim had a way of thinking up questions so as not to waste the silence.

“I don’t know,” I’d respond if I didn’t feel like talking, and he’d go back to the book he was reading.

We chatted on and off, half-strung out, loudly whispering over the hum of the highway and the top-10 radio. As the conversation lulled, we drifted into jostled half sleep in our upright seats, or maybe we just sat there with our eyes shut.

On the other side of the Chunnel, a French border guard got on the bus to check our passports. After that, I slept through the border between France and Belgium, and I didn’t notice anything. Perhaps the paint on the road had shifted colours. That was it.

I woke to “Please help me find Molly,” a party name for MDMA, coming over the radio in a feminine electric voice. It was my first time hearing the Cedric Gervais song, and I laughed as I stretched the sleep and drug out of my muscles. “What the hell?” I joked in hushed tones to my brother, and looked around, wondering whether the rest of the bus noticed or if they any clue what I found funny. I tried to shake the feeling that they knew, from the strain in our cheeks, that we were coming down from MDMA.

I caught the eye of a Dutch guy in oversized cargo shorts with stick-and-poke tattoos on his hands.

“Cool tats,” I nodded, motioning that I had a tattoo on my wrist as well. I was sitting on the inside seat, so mostly he and my brother chatted as we drove into Ghent. It turned out they both knew one of the same social centre squats in London. He gave us

the number of someone at another squat he was staying at in Brussels in case we needed a place to crash. He was transferring in Ghent, but were continuing on.

That evening was my first visit to the infamous party city of Amsterdam. Drugs, sex, and more were for sale in the city streets. I saw only the bus station in the south, and then we walked around the corner to a pullover, an official city-sanctioned layby for hitchhikers headed east toward the autobahn.

It was 7pm, and our goal was to catch a ride at least to the first service station outside the city and camp in the bushes for an early start tomorrow. Some of my hitchhiking friends would have hitched on through the night, but it's an exhausting way to travel. You never truly sleep in a moving car. We figured we could make it all in one day tomorrow with an early start.

"When was the last time you saw Rich?" my brother asked as cars and under-sized European trucks drove past, picking up speed toward the highway.

"The last Christmas we spent with them in Ontario—when Grandpa was still alive. I was in grade six, I think."

As dusk approached, a small car slowed and pulled over onto the shoulder. A tall, blonde woman wearing hiking boots gave us a lift on her way home from work. "It might be hard to get a ride," she warned us in her slight accent. "Hitchhiking is less popular now that all the Dutch students have the national rail pass. And it is a holiday weekend. There will be a lot of cars on the roads, but the Dutch, they go on trips with their families. Everyone will have children in their cars." She dropped us off where we wanted to go. It was only about twenty kilometres away from where we started, but it was a large gas station with international highway traffic headed toward Germany.

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We kept trying to hitch by the light of the gas station awning, just in case. Our cardboard sign said *ÖSTERREICH*, Austria in German. Our route was Amsterdam to Frankfurt in Germany, to Vienna in Austria, to Budapest in Hungary. We had both read that hitchhiking worked better if using a sign for a destination closer than our final stop, but writing Austria on the sign, we hoped for a ride that would take us most of the way.

After the dew had fallen for the night, we retreated to a patch of the wet grass behind a fence at the edge of the gas station grounds. We slept shoulder to shoulder in Tim's small tent and awoke the next morning to wide blue skies and a horizon hazy from humidity already rising off the Dutch farm fields. Our cell phones still had battery for alarms since we turned off the mobile connection. We couldn't afford the high EU roaming fees for UK sims.

The smell that came from the warm grass on the wet air that morning reminded me of southern Ontario—in the way that only smells can—and of driving from the Toronto airport through fields of cow-feed crop to stay at Grandma and Grandpa's.

“What's your favourite memory of visiting them?” my brother asked with his arm and thumb extended at the side of the highway on-ramp.

“Before or after they moved?”

“Either—or both,” he said.

“When Grandma and Grandpa lived in Drayton, it was the boat wars in the creek, when you, me, and Rich used to build wooden boats out of scrap wood in Grandpa's workshop and race them down the stream by throwing rocks behind them.”

“You know,” he thought out loud, “Rich is ten years older than you. You were six, I was eight, and he was like sixteen, out there playing with us in the creek: a teenager babysitting his kid cousins.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, but I hadn’t pictured him babysitting us. “His kids are like six and eight now,” I said, staring out at the highway. “They never met Grandma or Grandpa.”

Our cardboard sign indicated our ambitious route, and whenever a car pulled over, we thought they might be going the whole way. I would say hello in Dutch, which was basically the same word, and then try to read out the question we had written down off the internet “*Rijdt u toevalling in de richting van Oostenrijk?*” They would laugh at my poor attempt. They were not going to Austria, they said. I learned that nearly everyone in this part of Europe who owned a car also spoke English. After three hours and five or six rejected rides, we gave up hoping for Austria and accepted a drive from a tall Dutch man with grey hair and rusting car who said he could not take us to Austria but he could take us 100km closer to Germany. Tim chatted with him up front while he drove us to another service station in the Netherlands. We were making progress.

Our next ride took us only to a service station further south, following the border rather than crossing it. We covered barely 250km that day. We kept getting rides further down the lower leg of the Netherlands. Our last lift before dark was with two Turkish guys excited to share their electronic house music with us and who seemed certain they knew where we wanted to go.

They got us over the border into Germany. Unfortunately, where they needed to turn off was a split in the highway rather than an exit. “Here!” I said, watching the sign for Frankfurt slip away. There was no service station and no on-ramp back onto the

autobahn. We should have gotten a map with the stops labelled. They had to pull over illegally to let us off on the shoulder. All that the four of us could do across the language barrier was shrug and force a laugh.

I was used to shoulder-side hitching in Canada, but it's strictly verboten on the autobahn, Tim reminded me. We dashed across the dividing road and tried thumbing the ongoing traffic. Sitting on a cement divider under the colourless sky of a grey sunset, we watched car after car of blonde Dutch families fly past at 140 kilometres per hour into Germany. There was little more than a lane's width left for a car to pick us up. A transportation service truck with flashing lights pulled over behind us instead.

"What's this?" I asked Tim. I tried not to think about the LSD-laced sugar cubes in the bottom of my bag. I should have moved them to Tim's bag by now.

The service worker got out to speak with us. He was just there to divert traffic for safety when the police arrived, he said with a shrug.

My brother tried to distract us from the caution lights of the service truck. "What was your favourite memory after they moved to Guelph?" He was asking about our grandparents' place in town that they got after the old farmhouse.

I could feel nervousness in my gut. "Probably playing role-playing games in their basement for like a month every summer, going on adventures at the spare dining room table."

"We spent more time doing that with the neighbour than socializing with the family."

"Was Rich too old to play with us?"

"No, Rich didn't visit them as much those summers. Where was he living?"

"Maybe he was tree planting in BC. I don't remember."

A white and neon car labelled *P O L I Z E I* in bold arrived shortly after the service truck.

“Passports,” the officer demanded in English after we stared at his German words. He had handcuffs, a radio, mace, a touchscreen tablet, and a pistol on his belt. None of the police in the UK had carried guns. He took our documents and returned to his car.

It started to rain—slow big drops that threatened to empty the sky of its humidity.

He came back from the car with his partner after checking our legal status on his computer. We were two Canadians who had just come across the border from the Netherlands.

“Empty your pockets,” he said in accented English.

Balancing everything in our hands, we showed him our dead phones and wallets. My brother had bundled papers, his emergency injection needle in case he got a bad bruise, a black marker, and the novel he was reading, *The Sun Also Rises*, in his shorts cargo pockets. I had my notebook and two pens wrapped in elastics.

The officer checked each item, pushing his fingers through the folds in my wallet. He found a business card with a corner torn out of it. I’d given it to Bertie to roll a spliff.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A business card someone gave me.”

His demeanour shifted. “Open your bags,” he said. “Take every item out. One by one.” The officer watched me while his partner watched Tim.

I pulled out my camping tarp first, opened it for the police officer, and then folded it over. Everything that I removed and showed him with a shaking hand, I placed under the tarp in the quickening rain. My spare pocket notebook, my laptop case, which I opened for him, my spare shirts and shorts, my sleeping bag and bed roll, my spare water, and last, our food bag, in the bottom pouch of my backpack, which he instructed me to open. Inside, along with sandwich supplies, granola bars, and pickles, was a plastic baggie wrapped around coffee and the sugar cubes.

He took it out of my hand and opened it up. The sugar cubes were bundled in cellophane next to individual packets of instant coffee powder. Tim and I were both looking at him holding the baggie. He opened the sugar cubes to the sky. A large rain drop hit them. He bundled them back up and passed them to me. He demanded I show him that all the pockets in my bag were empty.

At the end of the search, they said nothing. He was annoyed at having to stand in the rain and instructed us to pack up and get in the back of their car. I looked at Tim as I rushed the things back into my backpack, but he wasn't looking at me. In the car, the officer said they would drive us to the next service station on the autobahn.

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“We should keep trying tonight,” I told Tim.

“In the rain?”

We waited out the weather until after dark in the gas station cafeteria. They sold a massive one-litre can of the 10-percent Danish beer that I used to drink in Canada. It was more expensive than the other beers, but worth the novelty after our last ride and if

we were going to be camping for a second night in the wet bushes. We got in line at the till.

“You know, when Grandma was losing the ability to speak, she still asked one of her daughters for a vodka-orange, a screwdriver, every afternoon,” I said.

“Yeah?” my brother laughed. He hadn’t seen her since she’d gotten worse.

I bought the beer, and Tim swiped a highway map of Germany with all the autobahn exits and service stations labelled.

We shared the oversized beer outside with two Polish hitchhikers on a wet picnic table, our hoodies and scarves drawn tight against the chilly night. A day and a half on the road, and we’d only made it a fifth of the way to Budapest.

The next morning, Tim packed up the tent while I cut apples into granola for us.

“What do you think if we don’t make it to Rich’s in time?” Tim asked.

I didn’t have an answer.

We started hitching just after dawn, holding out our hopeful sign for Austria.

“I should get internet in the gas station and send him a message that we might be late,” I said. Tim was holding the sign and reading his novel.

“Don’t just stand there reading,” I said, frustrated. “Make eye contact, smile. Get us a ride.”

“You go send the message,” Tim said. “I’ll read and keep hitching.”

As I was walking away from Tim, a box van towing a wooden trailer pulled up next to him. Tim spoke through the open window.

“He’s going to Vienna!” Tim shouted. He was going all the way to Vienna, 900 kilometres closer.

“Vienna!” I cheered to Tim. We might make it.

The ride took most of the day because he only drove at about the Canadian speed limit on account of the trailer. Sports cars and family vehicles both passed us at dizzying speeds on the autobahn. Our driver, a greying man with black-framed glasses, exported small-brewery beer to gentrifying hipster bars in London. He was coming back mostly empty to return branded bottles, and he let us take turns dozing in the back of the van on his mattress among the beer crates.

Crossing most of Germany in a single day compressed it in my mind. Looking out the van window at the breadbasket of western Germany in silence, I imagined those steel monsters of Canadian history, German tanks, amassing across the fields and headed towards France.

When he dropped us off before Vienna at a service station surrounded by tall spruce trees, he gave us each a large beer with labels I didn't recognize. "For the Canadian brothers," he said.

"Should we save them to share with Rich?" my brother asked when the van pulled away.

"We can't split two beers with three people," I answered with a caricature of a smile, but we agreed we would only open them on the road if we were stuck camping that night. One more ride might take us all the way.

I made a new sign for *BUDA* while Tim started hitching with his thumb. After a supper of the last of our sandwich supplies, we got a ride across the Hungarian border, and by dusk, we had made it to an info-centre pull off at the edge of Budapest, just 20km away. The sun was setting over the farmlands of the Carpathian Basin. We could see fields all the way to the horizon separated by fences and lines of brush.

On the side of the service station was a pay phone.

“Should we call Rich?” I proposed. “We could ask him for a drive.” We had his number, but we hadn’t spoken to him by anything other than email—since childhood, actually—and he hadn’t heard from us since we left London three days ago.

“Is he the kind of cousin we can call to pick us up out in the country after dark?” my brother asked as I held out our cardboard sign for Budapest in the fading light.

“What time is it?” I asked. My cell-turned-clock had run out of battery. I forgot to check in the last car.

The sun was setting at 9:30 in London, but this was farther south. I didn’t know.

“If we don’t get there until morning, we only have one full day with them before they leave for Canada,” I said.

“Still,” my brother hesitated, “some kinds of people are okay with a late-arriving guest...” He left the rest of the sentence hanging.

“Yeah,” I said. “We don’t know.”

We walked up a high bank to find space away from the traffic for our tent. After it was set up, we cooked couscous on my brother’s hiking stove and watched the red taillights of cars disappear into the distant valley. The name on the dark turnoff sign lit by passing cars could have been for any city. I opened the two bottles and passed him one.

“What’s your best memory of her?” my brother asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I never really got to know her.”

“When she and I were the only two awake in the mornings,” Tim said, “she would drink her coffee with the paper and let me sit at the table with her. She cut up an orange for me, but I wanted the peppermint candies in her red jar on the side table. I was reaching for it when my chair fell over. Mom says I bumped my head, but I don’t think

so. I felt fine. Grandma was the only one there and she grabbed me and got my injection. I was crying because I didn't want the needle. She sat on the floor to hold me still, and she jabbed it into my arm, and she just sat on the dining room floor cradling my head and crying."

We sat in the silence of the distant highway, warm beers dangling in hand.

"We should have tried to make it to Rich's tonight," I said.

"We've hitched for three days to visit," Tim said, taking a sip. "He'll understand."

Chapter 8

We stood outside a tall plaster building in an alley barely wide enough for a person and a car. This was Rich's place.

Our path into Budapest was one ride from the service station into the city. The middle-aged woman didn't speak much English, just enough to say, "Have fun in Budapest," at the park where she dropped us off.

It was some time under the morning sun—our cell phone batteries were dead—and we were somewhere on the outskirts of Budapest—our map didn't go any further east than Vienna.

"We're lost in both time and space," Tim joked looking around at slate-peaked roofs, run-down country homes, and faded storefronts on the outskirts of Budapest.

But we knew where to go. We had directions to find Rich's family's apartment from any metro station. When we emerged into central Budapest, the city's sandstone and plaster-fronted buildings, almost a century older than most of London, stood at attention over us. The wide boulevard was broken by narrow alleys, and we could smell the summer heat coming out of the fronts of restaurants and the backs of their kitchens. After busing and then hitching all the way from London, we smelled about the same.

We rang the buzzer outside Rich's tall apartment building. It was indistinguishable from the rest of the buildings on the street.

Our cousin was a father and a teacher. This was our first time seeing him since any of us had become adults. We had two days with him and his family, and then they were going on vacation, and we had to go somewhere else.

“Come on up.” It was his voice over the intercom, “Fourth floor on the left.”

Our cousin was tall like most of our family. He was my brother’s height, but he resembled his Italian mother as much as his Scottish-Canadian father. He was wearing a t-shirt and soccer shorts around his top floor apartment with windows wide open to the summer air.

He hugged us, and the first thing he told us was that we stunk. The second thing he did was offer each of us a beer.

His sons were away with his wife at their Hungarian grandparents until tomorrow when they all were getting ready to leave to visit Canada. None of us mentioned our grandma.

“Get showers,” he said. “The day is ours.”

If we would have gotten there earlier, we would have had the entire weekend with him, but he didn’t say that. I didn’t ask if he would have been able to pick us up if we had called.

Freshly clean, we sat in his living room with glass bottles of beer and ate from a cracker and olive platter that he set out for us. His apartment had twelve-foot ceilings and a hardwood floor, but the stippled plaster on the arches above looked like it had collected uncleanable grime for more than a decade. His view across the street was into someone else’s open living room window where their drapes swayed in the wind.

“I’m sorry it took us so long to get here,” I said. I described how most rides, other than our saviour with the Austrian beer, were only going one exit farther on the highway.

He told us not to worry about it. This wasn’t Canada, eh? “What’s the difference between an American—well, or Canadian, same thing—and a European?” he asked,

setting up his joke. “An American thinks 100 years is a long time, and a European thinks 100 miles is a long way.”

Rich had to work tomorrow. He taught history in English part-time, and it was his last day with his students before summer vacation. But it was only noon and it was our first time in Budapest, so what did we want to do?

Tim looked at me and then back to Rich. “Do you want to take acid?”

Rich didn’t flinch. “Will I get to talk to the trees?”

He had never taken acid before. It was only my third time, I said. We had it on a couple camping trips in Canada, but not always strong doses. It might have been my fourth or fifth time.

Tim got out the sugar cubes to show Rich. “It’s not enough to bring the trees to life, but that doesn’t mean you won’t talk to them,” Tim said

Rich got up and circled the apartment, clasping his hands. “Alright, let’s do it.”

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I sat on the futon facing the window. Rich sat in the armchair. Tim sat in a spinning computer chair.

“When am I supposed to feel anything?” Rich asked. We were on our second beer.

It started as a skittering in our chests, like a shot of espresso kicking in. I took a deep breath, the drug tightening on my ribs. I always forgot what LSD felt like until that exact moment when it came back.

It became a wetness on our fingertips. Maybe we were sweating. Maybe it was the cold beer. Maybe our hands weren't wet at all. I couldn't wipe the feeling off. The curtains were moving more now, and maybe it was the wind, but if so, the wind was breathing in and out as I was.

The walls were whiter than before, the sky outside bluer, and the window across the street darker.

Tim was spinning in the chair and telling Rich about the German police searching our bags.

"Of course the fascist German police searched you," Rich laughed. "You looked like you were carrying acid." He was enjoying bullying his younger cousins.

The absurdity of the image of us hitchhiking made me giggle. Tim's tangled hair and those red glasses, which he seldom wore but used when hitchhiking, hanging off his face by one arm. I wore a bandana to keep the sun off my head, and I stuck out my thumb with my right arm, with the tattoo underneath, and my collection of bracelets: six of them now, plastic, woven, and cord, all gifts from people I'd known or places I'd found them. We looked like two hippie brothers hitchhiking east out of the Netherlands, the drug capital of Europe.

Rich reached out to touch the white plaster wall. The wall reflected lights that weren't cast on it from any source, and it looked to me like Rich was changing the hue with his touch.

"Do you think it's working?" Tim was bullying Rich back. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt showing off his tan. He looked like a caveman in an office chair.

Rich nodded, staring at the wall.

Tim stood up. "Let's go to a park."

We triple checked everything. Did we have drinks? Yes. How would we carry them? I'll take a backpack. Do you need to borrow a backpack? No, I have one. How many drinks do we want? Bring all the beer. No, bring three each. We can always buy more. Do we have water? Put some more in the backpack. Do we need our passports? Yes, technically, but don't bring it. Just say you forgot it. Do you have stuff to roll a spliff? Yes. Bring that. Do you have the keys? Yes. Don't lose them. No, these keys open the gate to the whole building; it's really expensive if we lose them. Do we have everything? OK, we have everything. Let's go. Wait. I'll get my scarf to sit on. OK, do we have everything? Yes, let's actually go this time.

It reminded me of taking inventory in a video game.

"I feel like Bilbo at the start of The Hobbit," Rich said.

"We're going on an adventure!" Tim proclaimed.

"I can't believe I let my two kid cousins give me acid," Rich said, wrapping his arms around us.

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We walked through Budapest's shady streets and sidewalks pretending to be normal. Rich instructed us not to open our beers until we got to the park in case any of his students' parents saw us. Normal meant making eyes at each other but not talking, seeing colours shift on the bricks of the buildings in the summer sun, but not mentioning it. Seeing faces behind sunglasses look like secret agents watching us, but not saying anything. We were on a mission to get to the park.

I started giggling first, and it was contagious. Crossing one of the great bridges of Budapest, its lampposts glowing in the daylight above us, we turned to face the river at a lookout spot so that no one else on the bridge could see our faces, and we laughed, glancing sideways at each other and at how our faces, all with the same big family nose, glowed when we laughed.

From the bridge, we looked south at the skyline of Buda and Pest on opposite sides of the river. The Danube was low in the summer heat, and its stone wharf and the buildings towered above the rocky river bottom.

Rich pointed out the three tallest towers stretching over the river into the blue sky. The spiny parliament of Budapest, the Buda Castle on the hill, and the Roman Catholic Matthias Church. “The three historic powers of Europe,” he said. “The politician, the king, and the pope.”

The buildings shifted above a wavy horizon, like heat was rising off the whole of the city. The spires pierced the sky and sent a cascade of hues into the blue.

“There’s the new one,” I said, pointing to a glistening neon bank logo.

“It’s always been the same *one*,” Rich said, emphasizing the singleness of the word.

We crossed the river and walked into the Buda Hills. We climbed sidewalks between lookouts, small parks, and more old sandstone buildings. We talked about our family, about how our mother and Rich’s father were close siblings growing up on the farm in Ontario. We asked him what he thought about our two fathers: Tim’s father, the Maritimer with British parents who Mom sailed around Nova Scotia with, and mine, the back-to-the-land computer programmer and hobby farmer who married into Rich’s

family and raised us. We talked about our mutual grandfather, the cow farmer, who died when Rich was sixteen, and who I never knew except in Mom's stories.

"You're a father now!" I proclaimed.

"I'm a father!" he said as if he didn't believe it either.

We reached a hilltop plaza that looked out over the city river valley through a ring of arches, each framing a different view of the city, a different scene of life. The sun was cooking the city from above, and we retreated to the shade of the park. The trees behind the plaza swallowed the sounds of the plaza and the rest of our afternoon. We drank our beers near a ring of statues of world philosophers and male spiritual leaders. Abraham, Jesus, the Buddha, and Laozi stood in front of Mahatma Gandhi and others.

"Imagine if all these guys got together and had a beer," I said.

"That's what the sculptor wanted you to think," Rich pointed out. "Meanwhile, where are the women? Abraham here came to the meeting of the boy's club to speak on behalf of all his wives," Rich joked.

"Where *are* the women?" Tim looked at the three of us.

"Imagine if they all got together and dropped acid," I said.

"Jesus, Buddha, Abraham?" Rich asked, "They basically went out to the desert to hallucinate a burning bush and came back to the cave to tell everyone they had figured out the meaning of life."

That was Moses, I thought. Rich was like an older, older brother, always making sure he got in the last point, and we let him because he was.

On the way back to Rich's apartment, we pretended to be normal as we got more beer at the shop. I started calculating the units alcohol per Hungarian forint on the

drinks, but Rich stopped me. “Is he always like this?” Rich asked. Drinks were on him, he said, and he bought us his favourite Czech beer.

We drank in Rich’s apartment as the sun set on the city, and our world closed in on its tall, arched ceiling that swam with colour and the patterns of fabric. Tim made coffee and a mess when he spilled the grinds across the counter. I scolded him. What was he doing with Rich’s expensive coffee. We had cheap stuff. Rich continued to laugh and talk and debate with us into the evening, and the night blurred with the effects of the beer. “Shakespeare was not cheesy,” Rich argued. “Oh, OK,” I insisted, “I guess it’s normal for teen romance to end in suicide.” We spoke with animated hands, standing to prove points. “*To be or not to be* is *not* cheesy,” Rich said, “I was sixteen and watching Hamlet on TV when your mother, *your mother*, came downstairs to tell me our grandfather had died!” We paced the apartment, following Rich as he did. “That’s not cheesy,” I conceded, but I told him *he* was cheesy, and he laughed and opened the fridge to get us more beer. “I’m not the one dressed like a hitchhiking hippie,” he said. At one point, my wallet pocket was empty. I left it in the park! We back-tracked down the apartment building stairs and discovered my wallet in my other pocket before we had reached the street. We kept calling him Rich, he pointed out. His name is Richard now. I’ll stop, I promise. It’s OK, he said. We’re family. At one point Tim and Rich were wrestling on the futon to prove who was stronger, the thirty-something or the twenty-something, and I decided to put them both in headlocks, and I ended up on the floor. At one point I was trying to explain how I wasn’t ashamed to cry at emotional parts in movies, and I started getting tears in my eyes like it was an emotional part in a movie.

We didn’t talk about our grandmother all night. We were with family. We knew she was on all of our minds.

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The next day, Tim and I slept in while Rich got up to teach his last class of the school year. Rich and his family were leaving the day after. Tim and I had to decide where to go after Budapest. When I checked my laptop, I saw an email waiting from Canada. I had more editing work. Maybe 40-60 hours. I could do it if I could stay connected on my computer somewhere.

We met Rich's two sons and his wife Zoe for the first time. Tim and I played with the two boys while Rich and Zoe got them ready to leave for their trip. Rich's family was lovely, and they deserve their own story. They don't belong in this one.

At the end of the day, I explained our plans and predicament. Zoe offered to let us stay in their apartment while they were gone.

"Yeah, use our place to do your work," Rich said. "We'll be gone for two weeks."

So that was how Tim and I ended up staying in an apartment in Budapest.

Chapter 9

I pushed Rich's dining room table to the biggest window in the apartment. I faced it with my computer, and I got to work. Tim went out to explore the city. He drank with people he met—sometimes during the day, sometimes at night. I typed away in the evening under the large open window and I listened to the nighttime revellers in the streets and to the quiet sounds echoing down the alleys of Budapest in the night. I tried not to think about where Tim was.

One night, while I was working past midnight, the city fell silent outside, and Tim didn't come back to the apartment.

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From Tim and Rich and my time in Budapest, I got a picture of the city in my mind. Budapest is a city that is both old and young.

Budapest is old because the boom and bust cycles of the country are revealed in its architecture like rings in a tree. Its ceramic-shingled spires have lasted from Europe's age of empires. Many of its structures survived both of the continent's great wars. Their stones bear bullet marks from shooting in the streets. Their brass plaques mark the names of absent Jewish families who had lived in those buildings and been killed under the Hungarian Fascist party. Jews were 1 in 4 Hungarians in the city of Budapest before the Holocaust and less than 1 in 10 after. The old men and women who I saw sipping beer on small patios were children when their Jewish neighbours wore stars on their

coats and were sent away by train. After the war, the survivors remembered losing their families' summer homes and being barred from attending churches under the Hungarian Communist party, and a new era of housing blocks sprung up on the outskirts of the city.

Budapest was also young at the time I visited because it was one of the cheapest cities in the European Union for British backpackers, German bachelor and bachelorette parties, and Norwegian tourists. On some streets could be found two foreign currency exchange shops per block selling local forints to tourists for euros, pounds, and krone. In the evening, packed beer patios on the Danube riverbank watched laser-lit party boats float by. The city was also young because of the urbanization of the country and the migration of Hungarian youth to the city. The central parks were alive at night with picnicking drinkers until the dance clubs opened, and then the dance clubs stayed open until dawn. Shouts, hoots, and yells echoed through Budapest's sandstone central district long into the summer nights.

I would have liked to say that I went out each night with Tim to the dance clubs and bars that cost less than a quarter of what going out in London cost and half of what it cost in my area of Canada, but I did not. As soon as I could finish my editing deadline, Tim and I planned to get back on the road and hitch north to meet up with Zuzanna in Poznan. She was Tim's closest friend in London, but it was up to me, he said, if we wanted to go there. Zuzanna was visiting friends in her old university city. I thought of Sal and my friends in my Canadian university city. I said I'd try to get through this contract in a couple of days so we could go.

When we arrived, Tim and I were sore to the core of our muscles from a month of moving about, dancing, drinking, climbing stairs, climbing buildings, and walking. That was before even carrying our backpacks along highways, sleeping on the side of

the road, and now wrestling in the night. We set up on the futon and a spare mattress in the main room with its tall windows open to Budapest's sky. We slept in every morning, and we slept through the traffic and construction starting outside with the rising morning breeze. We slept until the heat of midday woke us up, and then we lounged about chatting over afternoon breakfast, just the two of us.

Tim and I had gone looking for the cheapest ingredients in the shop around the corner and came back with bread, split-peas, potatoes, onions, and fresh peppers. Rich's family also left some ingredients in their fridge that needed to be eaten, and we could use their oil and spices.

"Why won't you eat the eggs they left?" I asked Tim, supposedly vegan. I'd seen him eat anything when we were drunk.

"Most of that was free from the bins," he said, sitting at their small kitchen table while I cut potatoes.

"They would toss these eggs out," I argued, "if we weren't here to eat them." I wanted to cook them up for us. If we diverted the eggs from the waste by eating them, it's actually better for the environment than if we bought tofu in the store. I said soy needed to be grown and cultivated. These eggs were a rounding error in a family's grocery stock that would go to waste if we didn't eat them.

"Sure," he said. "Fine." He let me scramble them for us with peppers and garlic.

"Why are you a vegan?" I asked while he was washing the breakfast dishes.

"Well," he began, turning to me with soap suds on his hands. "I was on acid, right?"

I laughed, and he laughed because I found it funny.

“Well, I was on acid, and Bertie was cooking a chicken in the oven for Christmas at Chalk Farm, and I couldn’t stop picturing it with the feathers it normally has.” We grew up with chickens with Mom and my Dad. Feeding the chickens was Tim’s chore. “And I just couldn’t think of any reason to justify eating animals other than *might makes right*.”

“So what’s wrong with free-range eggs?” I pushed.

“What happens to the boy chickens?” Tim asked back, raising his eyebrows. “Put into a meat-processor while they’re still alive, not long after they’ve hatched, to make dog feed or something. Horrible, yeah?”

We would continue to chat and argue as we flipped through Rich’s bookshelf or surfed the internet on our devices. The temperature outside would climb into the high 30s, and we hid from the heat of the city in the breeze of the open windows. By late afternoon, it would be time for us to eat again. I had to kick Tim out of the apartment if I wanted to get any of my editing work done. “You need to get out of here,” I said. Tim found listings online for BeWelcome picnics, island trips, and bar socials, and he started going out.

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We only had one key, the expensive one, and it made sense for Tim to take it with him so he wouldn’t have to wake me when he got back into the apartment if I was asleep. But it also meant that I couldn’t leave while he was out if I needed anything.

I worked late either way, and Tim usually returned after midnight while I was still awake. By the time the people he was drinking with moved on to a dance club, he

made a silent exit down an alleyway and wandered back home. He would come in drunk, stoned, and silent, usually only with enough energy to take off his shoes. He would tell me good job for working through the evening. Then he would open another beer and fall asleep sitting up on the futon, his beer still half full.

“Where should we go after Budapest,” I had asked Tim over a breakfast of fried potatoes and onions and garlic toast. The longer my work took me, the more it seemed like we would miss Zuzanna in Poznan and we would have to go south to catch up with her at a Rainbow Gathering she was heading to with a friend on the coast in Bulgaria. The Rainbow Gatherings were short-term hippie campouts based on a giving and sharing economy. They existed all over the world. The Bulgarian one near a beach on the Black Sea was the official European gathering. It was going to be the biggest in Europe that year. One of the principles they organized under was that no alcohol was to be brought into the gatherings. The policy actually stated no drugs, but depending on how people translated the word, it meant only no manufactured drugs. Tea, marijuana, and magic mushrooms were likely plentiful at the gathering in Bulgaria. Still, Tim reiterated, alcohol wasn’t allowed.

When Tim didn’t come back, it was the first time I went to sleep in the apartment by myself.

I had never worried about Tim before. Even with all the partying and the drinking, he was usually the responsible one. He had lived most of his life without me worrying about him. He always carried his recom injection with him in case he got bruised or hit his head. What was the difference now?

I began to imagine that he had fallen asleep in a park and got robbed or that he had fallen in the Danube, and I began to worry that night somewhat like our mother

must have. If he didn't come back, I wouldn't be able to leave the flat to go looking for him. He had the key.

I woke up in the mid morning, and the futon beside me was empty. He still wasn't back. I logged into my laptop to check for messages. None. It was quarter past 10 in the morning.

I heard the key in the lock, and he came through the door. His hair was a little scragglier than usual.

“What happened?”

He seemed hungover and in disbelief. “Yeah, I woke up in the police station.”

They arrested him and another guy swimming naked in a water feature at Deák Ferenc square. He barely remembered it. He was drinking with a group of people he had just met, and they decided to go swimming.

“I didn't want to get my underwear wet, I guess,” he said. “Bloody fascist, yeah?” he asked, and I laughed. They didn't charge him with anything, just put him in the drunk tank.

The weekend ended that night. Tim mostly went out in the day that week, to read in parks or to meet up with other people on the BeWelcome website going to free tourist attractions in Budapest.

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My work stretched on longer than I expected. At first, I didn't log many hours each day, and then as I began to get more regimented about working, my boss sent more tasks. The magazine I was working for had a quarterly deadline, so after I finished this

contract of editing and layout, there would be nothing more from them for at least two months. They wanted to know if they could count on me to get work done remotely. I had to do it then, or I would probably never have the opportunity again.

As I neared the end of my work, the weekend approached again. We could leave the next day, but Tim insisted that I go out with him at least once in Budapest. He wanted to show me the city as he had discovered it.

Unlike in London, we had a laundry machine and a functioning shower here. We shaved and put on clean clothes, but I still only had one pair of pants. There were many small marks and nicks in my travel cargo pants that would never go away, and by the end of the night, my clean pair looked just like I had been squatting in London again.

That night was a blur of Budapest's streets and open squares filled with people in the summer evenings. In the first store we visited, I found they had 2L of wine in plastic bottles for what converted to only \$2 Canadian. Ten minutes work. We put the wine in a backpack and met up with new friends of Tim's: a quiet German couple visiting the city staying with a blond Irish man named Liam who had been swimming in the fountain with Tim.

"So you're the busy brother Tim has been telling us about!" Liam said in his wispy Irish accent.

"So you're the guy that got him arrested swimming in a fountain," I laughed.

"It was Frankie's idea," Liam defended himself. I never met Frankie. "And I wasn't the idiot who took his underwear off," Liam said, putting his arm around Tim. Liam hadn't been naked.

Liam lived there, I found out. He tutored English to Chinese businesspeople and Hungarian tourism workers.

We wandered on a tour of Budapest's bronze street statues. We took pictures of us drinking plastic cups of wine with a rotund policeman, Detective Columbo, György Lukács, a little princess in a newspaper crown, and even Ronald Reagan, America's first Hollywood President. I balanced my wine on the head of the bronze man with a smarmy presidential smile. They made the statue taller than the person, but he was still shorter than me. He cut taxes for America's millionaire oligarchs by more than half, Tim said.

"Yeah," added Liam, he's an anti-communist idol for Hungary's right-wing.

We watched the sun set from a stone boat launch on the Danube where we raised our glasses of wine to the sun and skipped pebbles into the water. The Danube was so low, I could climb out onto old construction blocks that had been dumped in the river. One was defaced with a chisel and the year, 1947, the last time the river was this low.

We made our way to Deák Ferenc square lit up at night with sparkling lights and the laughter of young drinkers. It was where Tim had been arrested. I saw the fountain he and Liam had been swimming in. It had a glass bottom over an underground restaurant. "They were closed at the time," Tim said.

"You could have fallen through!"

"I was swimming," he said.

We bought another 2L plastic bottle of wine, and when the group moved to a bar, I half deflated it and squished it into my pants. The bouncers on the street shone a flashlight into my small backpack with my snacks and cups, but they didn't see the bulge of the crinkling wine bottle in my crotch.

The bar seemed like a squat with a cash register and glowing backlit bar counter in one of the rooms. It was a maze of dimly lit sitting areas, dance floors, balconies, outdoor patios, and, somewhere, bathrooms. We lost Tim's BeWelcome friends after

sharing a small spliff with them on an upper floor balcony. My brother and I explored the club's twisting halls of partiers carrying drinks. Some were dressed in suits, some dressed in club attire, some dressed in shorts and sandals, some wearing what looked to me like church clothes from the 80s, each going different directions. We danced by a DJ table and I pulled out the plastic bottle to half-fill empty pint glasses with warm wine in the dark throng of the dance floor. We found Liam again later, and he wanted to take us to another bar.

The rights and lefts we took through the streets outside lost me, but Liam knew where we were going. I was so drunk, my eyes bounced off the horizon as we walked. We walked past other drunks wandering into alleyways to relieve themselves against buildings, streams of urine dripping back into the street. "I have to piss," I said. Don't do that, Liam told me. Have some respect. I think I might have a bladder problem, I said. I really had to pee. The bouncers at the next club stopped us. They spoke a little English, but Liam could translate. He could speak a little Hungarian in his Irish accent. They said Tim and I weren't dressed for the club. We weren't allowed in. I asked if I could go to the bathroom. They said no. I stepped back onto the street, unzipped my pants, and started pissing right in front of the bar. The bouncer shouted at me and lunged toward me. I turned to face him and backed up, still pissing forward. The other bouncer jumped onto the street and began spraying me with a fizzing bottle. Zipping up, I ran after Tim and Liam.

The wine bottle started falling down the leg of my pants, and I had to stop them.

"I'm all wet," I said.

“He was bloody sprayin’ you with sparkling water!” Liam howled with laughter in the street. “You were pissin’ and he was sprayin’ you with sparkling water, your majesty!”

I stopped drinking at that point, but Tim motioned for more wine, and I filled a plastic cup from my bag. Liam took us to a smoking bar lit up inside but with no lights outside. We ducked under half-lowered steel sheeting in front of the door to get in. We had to buy their beer, Liam said, but he was going to roll a hash spliff that we could smoke inside. I bought beers for the three of us.

A baby-faced Hungarian man Liam knew joined our table. He spoke quietly and directly toward whomever he was speaking with.

Tim was bleary-eyed and leaning over in his seat while Liam and the man chatted.

“He’s like that every night,” Liam said, clinking his beer bottle against Tim’s beer that had only one sip taken out of it.

The Hungarian man was complaining of his apartment search to Liam. He said he should be able to stay in the spare apartment his parent’s owned. It had a balcony. But they were renting it out instead. “That should be my balcony,” he said, looking at me, “but because of all the tourists renting places I can only afford to live in a dingy flat *under someone else’s balcony.*”

“Hey, my cousin married a Hungarian,” I defended myself. “We’re staying at his place.”

“But you’re still a tourist here.” I couldn’t tell if he didn’t like me or was only pretending not to.

Liam separated from us there, and I helped Tim up. He awoke as I moved him, and I slid his open beer into my pocket so we wouldn't leave it and waste it. Tim could walk and hold his weight, but not without leaning against a wall. I put his arm over my shoulder outside and walked to the end of the street. I didn't know which way to turn.

"This way," he muttered. He knew the way home.

The streets were quiet but not empty at this hour. Spent drunks like us wandered from bar to afterclub. Down one alley just off the main street, a college-aged woman sat on stone steps, staring at the light of her mobile phone.

She was crying.

Tim stood free from me. He had the energy to hold himself up.

"We should see if she's OK," he said, his speech slurring a little.

I grabbed his arm again. "Nope." I was drunk too, but not as drunk as him. I tugged him past the alley and down the street.

He let me lead him at first. "Really, we should go back and check on her," he said, pulling against my arm around his shoulder. I didn't release him.

"Drunk men should *not* approach a woman alone at night," I said, pulling him forward.

"That's fine, but maybe she's not," he said. He could have pulled free from my arm, but I held it tight enough to let him know if he tried, I would escalate it. My grip was a threat.

"You're too drunk," I said, taking him further toward home. Two blocks later, still with my arm around him, we reached a street that I recognized by Rich's place.

Tim spun to go back, and our fight escalated.

He pulled against my arm. I yanked him back.

“We only have one key,” I said, holding him.

“Come with me,” he said, trying to pull free.

I put myself between him and the direction he wanted to go. We pushed against each other’s arms until we rolled to the sidewalk. The beer in my pocket spilled onto us. We shoved against each other on the ground.

The pavement was too hard to wrestle on. It stung our knees and elbows. Breathing heavily, we said nothing. We stopped moving. I held him in a lock, and he held onto a ballard trying to pull past me.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

“Let go,” he said.

We held the match like that, catching our breath against each other’s strength, until someone up the block started walking toward us.

Tim released the ballard. I released him. We stood up and walked back to Rich’s apartment. In the bathroom, door half open, I saw him checking himself for bruises.

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Neither of us mentioned the fight the next morning. We packed up to go in silence. Tim had gone out the day before with both of our money and bought travel groceries. We had both cleaned up the apartment.

We got over fights when we were younger by not talking about them. I would hold the grudge and try to avoid him, and Tim would eventually start talking to me again as if I had never smashed his toy block castle and he had never punched me in the chest.

That morning, hungover and trying to forget part of the night, we prepared our bags and cleaned away our breakfast dishes. We left a thank you present for Rich's family, a book Tim had just finished reading: *Into the Wild*.

We were standing on the metro platform with our hiking bags ready before we talked about where we were going.

"Well, where do you want to go?" asked Tim. We could go to meet Zuzanna at the Rainbow Gathering near a beach on the Black Sea, but now we only had two weeks until Tim's court trial. The gathering in Bulgaria was 1,200km in the opposite direction from London.

"The beach sounds nice," I said, but it also sounded too far away.

"Yeah, would you rather spend time on the road or visiting somewhere?" he asked. And then he said, "You know, there's a beach near Amsterdam."

Chapter 10

The continent was wide open before us like the highway on the plains west of Budapest. The highway might even get us there too quickly. We had two weeks until Tim's trial to cover the 1,400km to Amsterdam and then 500km to London. If we rushed, we'd get to Amsterdam with no place to stay. We needed to get internet and send messages to people we knew as well as on BeWelcome. On the Budapest metro, I suggested we take a different route than the one used to hitch into Hungary, so we went north to end of the line.

On the outskirts of Budapest where a business park met the highway, we found a fast food restaurant with free WiFi. Tim proposed a 1 hour time limit to send messages. He wrote to friends in London asking where we could stay when we got back. Was Gray's Inn evicted yet? Did anyone know any squats in the Netherlands where we could stay? Did anyone want to come down from London and meet us for a weekend in Amsterdam? *we'll have internet again in 24-48 hours*, he wrote. He also sketched a quick map on a napkin of the roads that we could follow north.

I began sending requests for BeWelcome hosts in Amsterdam. The website warned me that those members got a lot of messages. Three-quarters of the city's population in the summer was tourists. BeWelcome members who lived there had their inboxes flooded with unread requests—a bit like us at Gray's Inn. I broadened my host search by 50km around the city and continued sending requests.

Ideally, you're supposed to find hosts who have hobbies in common with you. I wrote to a vegan couple with a spare room that Tim and I were quiet and considerate,

and we would love to cook a vegan dinner for them. Otherwise we would be out and about in the city for 12 hours a day, I said. I wrote to a woman who had a picture of herself with a vodka bottle tipped upside down to her lips to say that we'd love to go out to cheap pubs or to drink in parks with her if she was available to host us. I wrote to a man who boasted that he had lived in squats to say that we had been squatting in London and we were easy to please if he had just a little space on the floor to put us up for a night or two.

Tim stood up from the plastic table. "Let's get out of here before I'm tempted to buy chips." We had freshly packed sandwich supplies in my bag.

Out of the air conditioning, the afternoon summer filled the sky with a wet haze. I put my bandana on, and sweat began collecting on Tim's forehead.

Amsterdam was infamous for decriminalized sex work, psychedelics, and marijuana. I'd heard stories about streets packed with burlesque shows and cafes where you could smoke weed until you locked yourself to the chair, too stoned to stand. When we got to Amsterdam, we would see what this legendary city had to offer, but we could take our time.

We walked up the road heading north until we found a shady tree to stand under, we put out our thumbs, and we started hitching up the Danube river valley.

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The Danube was a dried fish skeleton of bare stony shores with a trench that had been dredged just wide and deep enough for two passing river boats. Long ships with

three stories of balconies took retirees on tours of the old cities of Central Europe, from Budapest to Vienna, Bratislava, Passau, and Nürnberg.

Starting late, we covered less than 100km that first day. We camped that night on the pebbly banks of the Danube a short walk down the hill from the road we were following north-west. At dusk, we collected dried kindling that snapped in the day's heat, and we built a small fire inside a circle of stones on the river bed. We perched Tim's tin cook pot on rocks over the fire to boil water for hot instant noodles.

I wanted to ask him Tim about his trial, but if he wasn't thinking about it, I wouldn't bring it up.

The stars were out, the moon was not, and the riverbank's trees turned darker than the sky. The water behind our campfire was lit by the lights of the long cruise ships slowly working their way up the river at night. We had a plastic bottle of wine from Budapest that we bought with the last of our forint change. It was two extra kilograms that I was carrying for a night exactly like this.

From Liam, Tim had bought a little hash, which he stashed in a baggie in his sock. I rolled it for us. I was getting the hang of pinching the tobacco with bits of hash between the thin paper walls.

"How much do you think a ticket on one of those costs?" Tim pointed at the river boat with the lit spliff between his fingers.

He told me, and I did the math. I'd have to work 250 extra hours just to afford a week.

"That doesn't include drinks," Tim said.

I raised my disposable plastic cup of wine that I was still reusing from Budapest to tap against Tim's.

A thin moon came up over the trees on the river bank before we had finished the wine. It cast the water in a pale glow brighter than the embers of our fire, and we slept that night without setting up our tent, lying on our foam mats on the river pebbles.

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We woke late when the sun came over the trees behind us, and we swam off our hangovers in a wide shallow section of the Danube behind an island up stream. The river curved past and would carry us slowly downward if we lay on our backs and we lifted our toes to the surface.

“Let’s start every day like this,” I shouted to Tim down river as I stood and splashed sparkling waves through the air toward him. He ducked under to dodge it.

After drying in the sun, we found a shady part of the road to stick out our thumbs. We didn’t start hitchhiking until 1pm. Tim took the first turn while I sat and tallied my costs for my trip so far.

“How much did we spend on hash?” I asked. “And how much do I owe you for the LSD?” We had one sugar cube left, he said. He told me the cost. Each sugar cube was a hit for £5 from Sofi. Taking a dose of LSD cost less than an hour of my work for a trip that lasted the whole afternoon and evening.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

Still, where I could, I split expenses down the middle.

Two months into my trip—six weeks in London and almost three on the continent—and I had spent a little over \$1,000 Canadian. 100 hours work on my old wage, less now with my raise. It was about how much I had just worked in Vienna.

When my pay arrived in my account, I would replenish my savings, and a big chunk of the cost so far was my first week in London. Over the last four weeks, I had spent only \$400. 35 hours work.

After just one week's work, I could pay for a month of travel and living like this. My student loan payments weren't going to start until the end of the year. I could keep going until December at least. Leaning against a tree with my legs stuck out in the sun and my notebook on my lap, I smiled.

We had to pick up our bags and move ten feet down the road then to get out of the pursuing sun.

Our first ride that picked us that afternoon was driving all the way to Bratislava. Tim got the ride, so he sat in the front to chat. She told him she was a dentistry student studying in Budapest, but her boyfriend lived in Bratislava. She drove back and forth every weekend. She drove on the backroads with her windows open because her car didn't have any AC, she said with sweat on her forehead and shoulders.

"Did you hear about the heatwave in Germany?" she asked. "Some parts of Austria are reaching 40°," she said. "1,000 people died in Germany last week."

A thousand people. We had felt the heat in Budapest, but I was mesmerized by the number.

"Yeah," she said, "It doesn't make the news much because the average age is over 60, but those are people dying. Parents and grandparents."

She was going right into Bratislava, but we didn't know anyone in the city or have anywhere to go in the capital of Slovakia. We asked her to drop us off at a service station before the city, and we continued hitching from there. It was my turn to stand

with my thumb out while Tim sat in the shade and read from *The Rum Diaries*, a novel he borrowed from Rich when he left behind Hemingway.

“40° in Austria,” I said.

“Good thing we’re going through the Czech Republic.”

We bought a 1.5L plastic bottle of beer each to put in our backpacks at the gas station.

Our last ride of the day crossed out of Slovakia and into the Czech Republic as the sun was getting low west of the farmlands. We drove north through eerie fields of sunflowers. All of the flowers on the right of the highway faced the car, smiling at us, and all of the flowers on the left faced away, toward the setting sun.

We were back on our map now, and we asked our ride to drop us off at a large super station on the side of the main highway. We told our ride it was so that we could keep hitching through the night. We both knew we were getting dropped there to camp in a copse of trees somewhere behind the service station. Before we set up the tent, we took turns, one of us watching our backpacks, one hopping the turnstiles to get into the pay washrooms to refill our water bottles and use the indoor facilities. Sitting with our bags near a plug socket at the food court of the gas station, I flipped on my laptop and logged into the guest WiFi.

Request accepted. We would have a BeWelcome host near Amsterdam in two days as soon as they got back from travelling. It was Fons, a Dutch guy whose profile said he used to squat. Tim connected his phone to the WiFi and saw a message from Lidija. Gray’s Inn was still surviving, she said. But she wanted to come by bus and meet us in Amsterdam for a couple of days.

“Alright,” I declared. “We’ve got a place, we’ve got people, we’ve got a party. Let’s get to Amsterdam.”

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The next day, I was more motivated than Tim. I packed our tent up and got us on the road early. Tim’s energy in the mornings didn’t come until he mixed an instant coffee using lukewarm tap water from the service station. He didn’t add any sugar.

The fastest way to get a ride was to watch cars pulling into the gas station with out-of-country plates and then approach those drivers with a smile and a nod to introduce ourselves. A chat with drivers headed your direction was often successful. I approached drivers with German D plates. I said *guten Morgen* in German, and then I switched to English, confident that Germans driving elsewhere in the European Union could speak English. The first three drivers said they didn’t have space or weren’t going our direction, but a man in a blazer and a two-door sports car said he could take us 350km to Dresden.

Tim crammed sideways in the back with our backpacks, and I sat in front with the man to chat. He was a project manager, he said, though for what sorts of projects, he didn’t elaborate. He knew we were cool, he said, because he had partied with hippies like us in Ibiza. The road in the distance swam with heat lines coming off the pavement under a pure blue sky. He pushed his sports car past the Czech speed limit, showing off when he overtook cars, and I think I was cheering him on.

“Here,” I said, pointing to a sign for a service station just over the German border. He had to slow down and shift three lanes over to take the exit. After shaking

our hands for good luck on the road, he said, he drove off, and we stood under the awning of a German service station. It wasn't even noon yet.

We asked for rides there under the shade of the awning. The sun was soon casting shadows straight down underneath the glinting parked cars. Tim and I finished a litre of water each and refilled our bottles.

The heat was baking the entire parking lot.

A new sedan pulled up, we could hear the drip and sizzle of its engine when it braked. The driver left the car running and dashed from their air-conditioning to the service station entrance, sweat already dripping down his forehead.

A big truck rolled by, and I could hear the sound of its wheels sticking to the hot black asphalt of the pull-through lane. The syrupy bitumen rose to the top as if it were freshly poured.

“Look,” I showed Tim. I touched it and left a finger print in the black liquid of the melting road.

He stared out at the cars around us, their engines idling to pump cold air within. “They don't even see the irony,” he said.

The next ride we got, we made it past Leipzig. Another took us just outside Kassel before dusk. The tall glass bottles of beer at the gas station were only 34 euro cents before deposit. We bought three each to drink ourselves into an early bedtime. We camped for the night up on a construction site on an embankment above the gas station. As we watched the lights of the highway in the night, and I asked Tim about his court case.

“Yeah, it's absurd,” he said, but he didn't sound confident. He had been scouting a new squat with Bertie when the police pulled up. A neighbour must have called. Tim

was out on the street, keeping watch and a little drunk, so he wasn't concerned. He wasn't doing anything wrong. Bertie was inside the empty building. He hid and watched the whole thing.

The police searched Tim's bag and found pliers, four screwdrivers, metal clippers, and locks squatters used to secure doors. His charge was possession of tools with intent to cause property damage. Apparently carrying pliers and the like is only legal in the UK if you can prove you have honest intentions. The crown would attempt to prove he intended to damage the abandoned building as part of entering it, his lawyer had explained to him. Entering abandoned property is fine in the UK from laws dating back to stone buildings in tiny villages. The streets and the empty buildings both belonged to some aristocrat in the borough of Camden. Squatting is legal so long as you find the property with an open window. But breaking a latch or shutter to gain entry was criminal damage. He was standing trial for intent to cause criminal damage, and they kept the tools as evidence.

"That's it?" I laughed.

"I could go to jail," he said. The maximum sentence was twelve months.

We stared into the red tail lights of cars on the autobahn below us until it was time to crawl into our tent.

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The next morning, we got a quick, short ride farther west. We hadn't eaten lunch when we were picked up again, this time by two young co-workers from a charity driving a rental car. They were driving all the way to Belgium and would pass through

the south of the Netherlands. In their matching white golf shirts, it was difficult to place their personalities, but the driver had a tattoo of something cosmic poking out from under her shirt sleeve.

She was driving over 160km/h on the autobahn, and the rental car felt as easy as if it were going under 70. I was hungry, but we were making good time across Germany. I asked her co-pilot if, before we got to the Netherlands, she knew this service station on our map where we wanted to be let off to stay on the path to Amsterdam.

“We’re already in the Netherlands,” she said, “we just passed it.” What? I always tried to look for the border between countries. This time I didn’t even notice.

They were driving west toward Antwerp, not north toward Amsterdam. The driver pulled over into the next rest area, and she apologized again and again for missing our stop, but I told her not to worry.

She came to a stop in a small picnic area, a highway rest station with a bathroom and drinking fountain—no stores trying to sell anything.

“Thank you again for the drive. This is perfect.”

We stepped out of the air conditioning of their rental into the shade of the tall pines planted around the Dutch rest area. We were somewhere before Eindhoven, according to our highway map. We could still catch a ride turning north. Our German map went as far west as Calais in France, and it would do us the rest of the trip from Amsterdam to London.

“Let’s slow down,” Tim said. “We’re almost there, and our BeWelcome hosts aren’t back until tonight.” He pointed to a picnic table with shade. We could sit there, make a sign, and make a late lunch. Tim put together pickle sandwiches, and I used his

black marker to write out our next destination on the back of our sign for Cologne. “Use a star,” he said, and I wrote *AM☆DAM*.

The Dutch summer day was hot and humid, but not in our grove of pine trees.

A car pulled in, and two women about our age with buns tied in their hair got out. They shook the driver’s hand through the window. One of them waved in our direction with a big smile. They carried a cardboard sign with them too. From the car area, they held up their sign, which read *ANTWERP*, and they pointed it at our sign for Amsterdam and shrugged cartoonishly across the park.

Elżbieta and Ewa joined us for lunch. They were Polish, longtime friends from highschool, and they were hitching to Paris.

They had just missed our ride going to Antwerp, I said.

They had supplies to make salads with them, and we exchanged ingredients. Ewa traded us olives for our pickles.

“Canadian brothers!” Elżbieta beamed, “Do you know what’s wild? Our last driver gave us a tab of L-S-D to split.”

My brother and I looked at each other. I laughed. “That’s amazing. We just had an acid day in Budapest.”

Elżbieta was already getting it out to show us.

“You should take it,” Tim said. He explained how we still had one sugar cube left.

“You would take some too?” she asked. “You take yours, and we’ll take ours?”

I don’t know if that’s what Tim meant, but he loved the idea. He looked at me.

“We need to take it before we cross the border back into the UK,” I admitted.

Tim fetched it from his bag.

Sitting on the cement picnic table in the shade that sunny afternoon in the southern Netherlands, before we had done more than exchange names with Elżbieta and Ewa, I was slicing a paper tab of acid in half for them with my beard scissors.

I asked how familiar they were with the drug, but Ewa stopped me. They had done acid before.

Tim split the last of our sugar cubes in half by sawing it with a plastic knife.

“Here we go,” I said. We four raised our fingertips together in ceremony—they with tiny triangles of paper, we with a smidge of sugar, pinched between finger and fingernail

We didn’t have any beer left from Kassel, but Elżbieta and Ewa had wine, and they poured us each a glass in their spare travel cups.

Before the drug began to kick in, when everything seemed incredibly serendipitous but still normal, a woman in a black coat approached our picnic table.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I couldn’t help but notice you had a sign for Antwerp.” Their hitchhiking sign was propped up next to their large backpacks. “I only have room for two,” the woman said, “but I can take you all the way there.”

Elżbieta and Ewa looked at us. They didn’t know what to say at first, but the hitchhiking mindset kicked in. “Nice,” they exclaimed, “thank you!” And they hopped up to pack their lunch away.

“And we’re off!” Ewa said. We downed our wine and returned their stackable cups to them.

“Good luck today,” Elżbieta said to us. We embraced in sudden hugs goodbye.

“Wherever you go today,” I fumbled to say something funny and profound, “there you are!”

“And there you are!” Elżbieta shouted back.

We parted ways, only 150km south of Amsterdam, genuinely happy to have met each other in that sudden crossing, and all four of us coming up on LSD.

Chapter 11

“Well, we’re on an adventure now!” exclaimed Tim. His face was cast in orange light in the shade. I couldn’t tell how much of it was the red of a growing sunburn and how much was a colour only I could see.

We had split two sugar cubes three ways at our cousin’s in Budapest. This amount was less than that, possibly, but then add in the crumbs in the bottom of the bag we finished off, and then remember that the liquid LSD probably didn’t distribute evenly throughout the cubes when Sofi deposited it with an eyedropper.

The wine and the rising sensation in my chest made me giggle at the absurdity of our situation. All around us, the gentle shade of the trees climbed like a tent toward the blue sky, and out in the parking lot, blond Dutch families scurried between their air-conditioned cars and the bathroom building. The sun lighted them like a cosmic spotlight. One hour, we were making good time across Germany, the next, we were sitting in a Dutch picnic spot coming up on LSD.

Tim was mixing instant coffee powder into a water bottle. His face darkened under his cheekbones, and he looked to me like a goblin, with pointy ears in front of his hair, mixing a potion.

“You look like a skeleton to me,” he said. My bandana was my helmet in his eyes.

We two gremlins sat there on that beautiful day in the shade beneath that beautiful weather. The highway rest area was as wonderful looking to us as any city park. It had bathrooms and drinkable water. There was no need to go on a journey just to

find somewhere to pee. And we had a picnic table to ourselves in the back corner of the park out of earshot of other visitors.

“This place is a bivouac,” Tim hypothesized. “A temporary camp of travellers. Rest areas on Roman roads were the social gathering spots of travellers, pilgrims, merchants, and adventurers for two thousand years across Europe.” He proposed we set out our sign for Amsterdam to see who might join our table.

I protested with a laugh. “I don’t want to hitchhike like this.”

“It’s an adventure,” he insisted. We didn’t need to try to hitchhike, but what if we trusted the serendipity of the day and set out our sign to see who would come. If we got a ride, like those two Polish women, we got a ride, and off we would go. I conceded when he described it like that.

I sat with my back to the picnic table, facing the fence and the forested world. Tim stood in front of me, sometimes hopping and pacing as we spoke, facing the cars and families of the parking lot. He wore his red glasses, perched on his face with one arm, but I didn’t know what he could see out there in the world.

We talked about what we could do with the rest of the summer. “Let’s volunteer at some music festivals,” Tim suggested. He had worked two of them in the UK and he had contacts to get on last minute without going through the normal process. Festivals were always short staffed and in need of temps. Volunteers got fed and free admission. It seemed ideal. We could hitchhike and follow the other festival goers for the rest of the warm months. “The festival community in the UK is a bunch of oddballs,” pronounced Tim, standing in the Dutch rest stop on LSD with his hair tangled somewhat like a neolithic hunter.

What should we do after? When camping got too cold?

Maybe Gray's Inn would still be open. If not, somewhere else. We could squat in London until my tourist visa ran out in December. I was only allowed in the United Kingdom for 6 months from my date of entry in June. By then, our European Schengen time would reset, and Tim and I could come back to Europe. We could camp near Granada with the fire spinners Julie and Julien until spring, and then we could go somewhere else. We could go to Morocco, Tim said, until the desert got too hot, or Montenegro or Turkey until my visa time in the UK reset again. "You know, summer really is the best time to be in London," he said.

In December, I would have to start paying back my school loans. I didn't want to think about it now.

"What did you do about your student loans?" I asked him.

He laughed. "After seven years of no contact, they drop them, yeah?"

"What?" I laughed too. He just let his Canadian loans default. "We could do this for a long time," I said. I felt it. I could work a little online, three weeks out of every three months, to pay for expenses. Maybe Tim could too. "And we could spend the rest of the time doing this," I gestured to the vibrant green trees, glowing and swaying over us in the breezeless day.

Tim was looking the other direction. "Someone's coming our way."

&

A gangly Dutch man, taller than even me, with blond hair lighter than his tan, strolled toward us.

“Your sign,” he pointed, starting in English. He came to tell us that not much traffic on this road went to Amsterdam. If they were coming from Venlo or Dusseldorf, they would go up the A73.

I nodded even though I couldn't picture it. Online forums said to never trust locals for hitchhiking advice unless they've done it themselves. Tim unfolded our German map to get the man to explain to us again. In his thick Dutch accent, he pointed out the roads. He could take us to Den Bosch, he offered, and there would be more traffic there.

I looked at Tim, he looked at me. I think he was signifying that he was feeling OK to travel. “Excellent.” I said. “Let's go to Amsterdam.”

The man's austere facial expressions didn't encourage joking around, and it spread to Tim and me. We took on the man's businesslike demeanour. He drove a rebuilt hobby vehicle with what felt like thin steel doors that he had hand painted bright and dull mustard yellow. I couldn't tell if he had recreated some 1970s invention or this was a custom car.

I felt cognizant, so I sat in the front.

“Careful with the doors,” he said.

The man drove as seriously as he had spoken to us earlier, and we made small talk over the blowing wind coming through the windows about how long Tim and I had been waiting there. The three of us sweated heavily in his boxy-car, but it wicked off us with the windows rolled down. The highway in front glowed brighter than the sky and it dripped outward like it was spreading. I looked over my shoulder at Tim.

His checks were sunken and his eyebrows wiggled as he looked at me.

“Why do you hitchhike?” the driver asked. His legs on the pedals and arms on the steering wheel were longer than mine, and he looked like he might even be too tall to see under the sun visor.

“To save money,” I said, but it was more than that. “For the adventure,” I added. “For the people we meet along.” I thought of Elżbieta and Ewa.

He nodded but said nothing. He circled a small city and deposited us on a service station on a north-going highway. We were even closer to Amsterdam.

I got out my water to drink. Beside it in my bag was a crumpled empty bottle.

“This is our last water,” I said, showing Tim. We forgot to fill up at the picnic area.

We were at a full service station now, so we could get water while we waited, but standing on a shady patch of grass on the outskirts of the station, neither of us wanted to go into the busy mini-mall. The people looked too clean, too normal for a goblin and a skeleton.

“We just hitchhiked on LSD,” Tim proclaimed.

In the Dutch man’s car, the intensity of the drug had reduced somewhat. I felt in control, but still too timid to go to the busy service station.

“I bet our companions on this trip are outside Antwerp by now,” Tim said.

I giggled imagining them coming up on their drive. “Let’s keep hitching,” I said. We could make it to Amsterdam in an hour.

“Let’s play a game,” Tim said. “Imagine that our next ride is a creature from the otherworld, from the fairy realm, come to sow chaos in the human realm.” I held out our sign for *AM☆DAM*.

The sleigh that answered our call was an army green service van with no logos. In the back were open-tray tool boxes kept away from the front seats by a mesh net. The driver was shirtless in the summer heat. He wore tan work pants, and his closely buzzed blond haircut and beard made him look something like a Viking.

He pointed to our sign. "Amsterdam, yeah?" He didn't speak much English, but knew enough to say, "I will take you."

We got into the front three seats of the Viking's van.

He found out we were Canadian. "Yah?" he asked in his thick accent. "I have a present." He motioned to a tin candy case. He opened it while driving and passed it to Tim sitting in the middle. "Do you want to roll?" he asked. It was filled with sticky Dutch weed that smelled divinely like home. With it were three rolling papers. Tim passed it to me.

I began to tear up a sticky bud with my fingers, and he handed me a steel weed grinder.

The Viking rolled up his window to keep the wind away from the weed and then turned on the custom soundsystem in his mechanic's van. Its speakers began pulsing with the slow buildup of European electronica.

As I was rolling the joint in the sealed van cab, I began to sweat. Small beads collected on the backs of my hands while I fumbled with the paper.

The driver motioned to Tim in the middle. He was handing him a green glass bottle. The Viking had just bought it in France, he said. Absinthe, the bottle said. Take a swig, he motioned while driving and nodding his head to the beat of the music.

Tim made wide eyes at me. He didn't know how to act. Were you supposed to turn down offers of alcohol from fey creatures? Or be sure to accept politely?

Tim uncapped the bottle, slowly breaking its seal, and swigged down a long draw of absinthe.

I went next. In my left hand, sweat heavy on the hairs of my knuckles, I balanced a folded rolling paper with ground weed inside. In my right, I lifted the long glass bottle to my mouth. I could see my arms on both side and the whole dash of the van framed like a painting. I tipped the bottle up and felt the anise of absinthe slosh into my throat. With the European electro pounding, I looked down the barrel of the glass bottle, and the highway and horizon coming toward me reflected in its dark green curvature.

“Roll it bigger,” the Viking said, indicating the joint I was pinching between my fingers as he placed the bottle of absinthe between his knees. I put in more weed, and it started to overflow from the paper onto the steel case beneath it. He saw I was having difficulty and motioned for me to hand it back.

Driving with his knees that held a bottle of absinthe, the Viking leaned his wrists onto the steering wheel and rolled an enormous Valhalla trumpet of a joint. When he finished, he put the cone between his lips to light and rolled down his window for the smoke. We took turns with the oversized joint. It felt delicate but monstrous. I drew in the thick, wet smoke coming off the weed. Its flavour was strong and sweet with lemon grass. If we weren't driving down the highway, wind whipping through the van, the smoke of that joint would have been so thick, it would have blocked out the windows.

We finished the joint, and he found the spot to drop us off.

“Here,” the Viking indicated.

It was a turnoff, not a service station. He rolled off the highway and back to an on-ramp where a large sign read *Amsterdam 15km*. We were almost there.

Before we got out, he offered us the absinthe for another swig. He opened the small steel case again and gave us a pinch of more than 2g of his weed to take with us. We could roll ourselves another huge joint—or eight reasonable-sized ones. We were so stoned, we couldn't speak except to nod and say thank you.

“Welcome to Holland,” the Viking smiled.

&

Under the hot sun on a country highway turn-off, with nothing but a patch of grass to sit on, I reached for my water for a drink. My mouth was pasty and dry.

“We forgot to fill up at the last place,” I said again. I was stoned. There was only 200ml left in my bottle. We split it and finished it off. “That was the last of our water,” I emphasized the empty plastic bottle.

“Can we sit down a minute and appreciate what just happened,” Tim proclaimed as much as he asked. “That guy saw two hitchhikers, yeah? He found out they were Canadian and it was their first time going to Amsterdam, and he decided to get them stoned as ducks and give them swigs of his Parisian absinthe.”

I sat down beside Tim on the grass, and I began giggling too. “And he didn't even know we were on acid,” I said. It was still strong in our system.

“He didn't even know we were on acid!” Tim boomed out laughing.

Not having any water left on the side of the highway in a heatwave might have been dangerous, but it was also hilarious.

“We need water,” I laughed.

“Relax,” Tim insisted. “We're almost there.”

Cars continued to roll past, but I mainly heard the breeze. The Viking's weed must have been heavy with CBD more than THC, affecting our bodies more than our minds. There was an inner peace sitting on the grass with Tim, feeling its soft blades in my hand, beneath the late afternoon sun.

In that moment, with neither of us standing with our thumbs out, a four-door family car pulled over next to us.

The driver was a young man alone with an empty baby seat in the back.

“You look like you’re trying to get to Amsterdam,” he said.

We thanked him, standing, stumbling over our words. He deposited us on the canal bank opposite central Amsterdam less than twenty minutes later.

&

Tim and I felt like cheering when we had a view of Amsterdam's skyline. We weren't as high as during the peak of our drug trip, but the silhouettes of the buildings still swayed beneath the sky. From there, we could take a harbour commuter ferry for the same cost as a city bus and reach downtown. We would arrive in time for supper, but both of us were too excited to eat. We were in Amsterdam.

Beneath the clocktower of old Amsterdam, the sun was still high enough to strike the western faces of the buildings. At the train station, we found a public fountain to fill our water bottles, and we drank heavily until our arms shivered from the cold water.

The city's crest is a shield with three letters, XXX, the historic mark of Dutch alcohol on the high seas and now the symbol for pornography online. The city has a church to the patron saint of sex workers with a statue of one in the square beside it.

Unlike London and Budapest, drinking on the streets was subject to a ban enforced with an open liquor fine. Already high, we didn't mind.

I picked up WiFi at the train station to confirm with our hosts about our arrival. We decided we could ride out the rest of our trip downtown until time to go to their place.

Tim and I packed our big bags to be light enough, even with our tent, sleeping bags, and bedrolls, to be able to wander through a city—especially now that we were out of extra food and water.

We walked through Amsterdam's old city streets, some last paved in the age of sail. It felt like the tones of the sunset above were down in the alleyways. The three and four story buildings towered over us as if reaching to touch in the middle, but when I looked up, there was the strip of sky. The LSD was still in our system.

I pointed out a placard for a bar: €20 could buy us shots and a blunt, it stated. That was about the same price as the hash bar in London, and we would have to buy their expensive alcohol.

"Let's wait to drink tonight," Tim proposed, "with our hosts. Maybe we can go to a park," he said.

We strolled past tourist-trap shopfronts with the black band of Amsterdam and the city's XXX printed on shot glasses, keychains, wallets, drink coasters, and weed grinders.

The day was cool enough to explore now. Restaurant patios were filling up with college-aged groups and freshly-shaven men whose cologne we could smell outdoors.

Seeing our backpacks, young English-speaking bar promoters approached us with flyers. We could join them tonight for €30 each and go on a tour of Amsterdam's bars. We would get a free beer in five different bars, they said.

"No, thank you," we said. "Good luck today," we wished them. Someone who worked as a promoter had partied with us in Gray's Inn. They were paid by commission, she said.

I learned later that the Netherlands has a national holiday, Queen's Day, on which, one day a year, everyone goes outside their home and sells things on the street with almost no regulation. It is a day-off marked by partying, by odd flea markets, by garage sales, by bustling home businesses, and by profiteering. This mood of buying and selling, more than anything, explained the feeling I got in Amsterdam's city centre, the country's largest tourist attraction.

We turned a corner onto a street lit pink in the twilight.

A row of glass doors opened into the narrow alley. Some of the curtains were open. Each doorway was neon pink or red in blacklight that shone into the street. Workers stood in each doorway, their skin was like smooth fabric in the inverse colours of the blacklight. Their lips, boots, and underwear glowed incandescent. Their time was for sale.

The workers would invite you inside and shut the curtain after you negotiated a rate. I realized to stare was to say hello, to start a conversation, to initiate a business deal, and I looked away. I later learned from our BeWelcome hosts that the majority of sex workers in Amsterdam came from lower-income countries—from Bulgaria,

Hungary, and Poland—because they would work for less than the Dutch, and they could collect a premium selling to British and American tourists in the red-lit streets of Amsterdam. They were part of the city’s most famous tourist attraction too.

We left the street. I wanted to make eye contact, to smile and to say hello from a place of empathy, but their faces glowed bigger than their tight hairlines. I was still on LSD.

We changed our shirts and wiped our armpits in a burger restaurant bathroom, and then headed for the commuter train to our hosts’ place.

I showed Tim on the train map the directions our hosts had given us.

“Well,” Tim said, “They don’t live in Amsterdam.”

What? “That’s not good.”

“No, it’s even better,” Tim slapped me on my backpack in congratulations.

“They’re out in Haarlem. They’re by the beach.”

&

After Amsterdam, our days in the Netherlands were near perfect. Our host was a recent Dutch engineering graduate named Fons. He and his partner Janneke had been working at a festival in Belgium. Janneke was as tall as Fons, and she lived in a squat above a free charity shop in Haarlem. The whole building was their squat, actually. Janneke and her squatmates in the apartment upstairs were about our age, but they had been running a freeshop that gave away donations out of the empty commercial space on the main floor for more than three years. Fons had accepted us with his BeWelcome

profile, but he and Janneke were going to host us at her squat because most of her squatmates were away for the summer.

Squatting is different in every country, as I heard Tim and Fons discuss. It depends on the laws. Communities spring up in the space between ownership and regulation. In the Netherlands and Spain, said Fons, there were long-lasting squats in buildings decades abandoned that were run like collective houses.

That first night they took us to see a free concert at an outdoor beach bar. They knew one of the musicians performing, but admission was free for everyone. They asked if we had any weed yet, and I nodded and said we did. People would be smoking outdoors there.

The bar was built like a western movie set, with a large arched building opening onto the beach. The jazz musicians played facing the ocean, and we danced in the sand with orange lanterns overhead. The beer from the bar was about the same price as in Canada, and I bought Tim, Fons, and I each one to support the musicians. Fons sat mostly with us, smoking, while Janneke hung out with people she knew in the band. She doesn't smoke, he explained, but we rejoined her in the sand of the dance floor where we danced into the night barefoot under the lanterns.

Lidija arrived from London the day after. "Brothers!" she exclaimed. We met her at the bus station in Amsterdam, the one where we had been weeks earlier passing through, and she gave us both quick hugs. We had lived beside her at Gray's Inn after she moved in, but she felt to me more like Bertie's and Tim's friend. She didn't drink very much, and I didn't know her very well.

Gray's Inn wasn't the same without us, she said. Each floor had gotten more insular, and now the BeWelcome guests were hosting BeWelcome guests. Gray's Inn

had lasted longer than anyone expected. Everyone guessed that it was easier for the owners to just leave them in the building than it was to kick them out and take the next group of squatters to court instead. Still, they hadn't heard from the owners and could be evicted with 24 hours notice.

Lidija had moved her personal things into storage with all her school art when she left. She gave her room next to ours to Jakub from Barbican squat. She was visiting friends around the continent for two weeks before returning to London. Gray's Inn could be gone by then.

"I need a long-term squat, another Chalk Farm," she said. She wanted better space and time to be able to work on her art from home now that she no longer had studio space at her school.

"Well, we're heading back after this," I said. Maybe Tim and I would find a new squat before she was back. We could all squat together if we didn't leave for a festival right away. Tim and I still needed to set up our plans.

We had double-checked with Janneke if we could bring Lidija back to their squat for a night. It was no problem, but our sleeping area was their living area, so we had to be up and out during the day. After Lidija's visit she was taking the bus to Bremen. Tim and I still had time to hitchhike to London before his trial.

"What do you want to do for a couple days?" Tim asked Lidija and me.

"I don't really want to be a tourist in Amsterdam," I said.

"We're staying in Haarlem," Lidija said. "Let's go to the beach!" She had grown up next to the ocean in Latvia, and she said she missed the water—wild, living water.

When we went to the beach, Fons said he could drive us past the tourist area if we wanted. It was better, he said. But we'd have to hitchhike back. We decided to take

all our bags with us just in case. We could camp on the beach, Tim proposed, and before we left, we went to the store to buy beer and groceries.

The centre of Haarlem reminded me somewhat of Amsterdam. Its buildings were about the same age, but they were shorter, and more of the signs were in Dutch. From a little streetside marijuana counter that sold takeout products, we bought weed brownies.

As soon as we arrived in the beach parking lot, Lidija, Tim, and I raised our three brownies in cheers. As we ate them, we walked over the dune boardwalk toward the sand.

The beach was a nude beach, and the farther down we walked, the more nude people there were.

There would be some naked senior citizens, Fons had told us, but we hadn't really considered it. At Fon's instructions, we continued to the far end, past the beach bars with views of nude bodies and past the final set of washrooms, until we got to the last view of unobstructed beach and ocean extending into the distance.

We had arrived after the sun was highest, but we still needed sunscreen, and we stopped to put some on. Around us, naked people, mostly older than us, some couples, some alone, no three beach towels closer than 100 feet from each other, lay and sat in the sand.

The more stoned I got from the brownie, the more the naked bodies looked normal. We were on a beach of primates sunning themselves near the ocean breeze, and we were the strange ones in clothes rubbing cream on our faces and arms.

The brownies had more THC than the highway joint. This was what I was used to in Canada. My thoughts twirled, and the moment of us putting on sunscreen and deciding where to sit felt as long as the beach.

I should ask Lidija and Tim, I thought. “Should we sit in the nude area?”

I had never been to a nude beach before. Neither had Lidija, but she quoted one of her favourite authors to decide. “For Camus, the only way to live in an unfree world is to become so free that your life is rebellion.”

“This way,” Tim determined.

We continued walking to the end of the beach dwellers before we placed our towels. We stripped nude and laid in the sun. Lidija left her orange tan bottoms on to keep the sand out, she said. Tim and I needed to put sunscreen on our white butts for the first time that summer.

Tim and I opened beers, and we three chatted about London, squatting, festivals, and life. When the day began to cool, we left behind our towels to play in the warm sand. The three of us sitting there, talking in the afternoon, looked something like hairless chimpanzees with beer cans gathering at one of the most wondrous spots they could find. The sandy beach lounged endlessly in two directions, and the open cloudless sky was bigger than the ocean beside us.

“This is perfect. This could be our lives,” I said “We could find somewhere with a beach that sells weed and make a life of this.” We didn’t have to work dreary full-time jobs to live on the ocean. I laughed, giddy at the thought of it.

“What would your ideal place have?” Tim asked Lidija and me.

“A place to make art,” Lidija said. She worked with large materials that she had to collect. I thought of the Creamery squat with its art garden. “And not too many people,” she said

“No—lots of people,” I insisted. I thought of Gray’s Inn and working upstairs through the commotion below. I would need electricity and internet sometimes, I said.

“You could go to a café,” Tim proposed, “buy a coffee for a euro a day to use the internet.”

“It needs a place to get sushi from the bins,” Lidija smiled.

“It should have somewhere we can get alcohol from the bin,” Tim said, tapping his can of beer to mine.

“The basics,” I said, rolling over in the sand, “somewhere with shelter from the sun and rain—ideally no rain.”

Tim nodded. “And somewhere outside of the UK and Schengen visa zones so we aren’t trapped by passports.”

That night, we rolled a joint and saved half of our now-warm cans of beer for tomorrow. We camped on the beach the next day too and never returned to Amsterdam. Sand got everywhere in our bags and clothes, but I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

That first night, we sat on the beach long after the sun had set. We watched the stars come up and the ocean waves get darker until, far out to sea, lightning crashed in the offshore clouds of humidity. Between strikes of lightning in the distance, the wave crests were lit up, faintly, by phosphorescent algae, and their glow outlined the whole sea. We ran naked into the waves, three pale bodies against the thrilling night.

Chapter 12

The waves of the channel crashed against the beach at Dunkerque. The British shore waited somewhere beyond the horizon, its thin grey line broken only by two DFDS ferries passing each other at sea. Tim tapped my tall Dutch beer with his. “To the summer ahead.”

Lidija had gone east toward Bremen by bus. Tim and I hitched west toward the ferry, and we got a ride near the terminal from a car with Albanian license plates. We hitchhiked with a sign that read *LONDON* ☺ in black marker.

“We will join the queue at 9,” Saban said. His ferry ticket was for just after midnight since it was cheaper. “If we’re at the front, maybe they will let us on the 11pm trip.”

The three of us sat on a cement walk overlooking the cold beach. The summer heat had dissipated once we reached Northern France and the English channel. Tim and I got cans for the wait. Saban politely refused. His family wasn’t strictly religious, but he didn’t drink anyway, he explained to us in short sentences.

Saban was a tiny man in a secondhand windbreaker driving to England in a two-door hatchback. He could take us the whole way into the city once we crossed the channel. He asked why two Canadians were going to London.

I told him how we were returning to London, how after visiting our cousin in Budapest, we had just spent two weeks hitchhiking and camping around Europe. I thought we looked it. My cargo pants were smeared on the thighs with sunscreen, and my sandaled feet were dusty with summer tan and road dirt. We’d cleaned up in a gas

station bathroom that morning, but we just came from camping on the beach near Haarlem, and the last time we showered was three days ago at the squat.

I told Saban I was amazed at the lack of borders between European countries. Sometimes all you notice is a change in the highway paint and the language on the street signs.

“It’s different when you cross from Serbia to Hungary,” Saban said.

“And here,” Tim nodded at the grey waters. “There’s a whole village at Calais of people from outside the EU hoping to get across.”

Saban wanted to know how we could afford to live in London.

The beer had loosened me up. I told him I was there on a tourist visa, and I told him about squatting, and that we planned to volunteer at festivals coming up later in August and September.

Saban left to find a washroom, and I raised my can in front of the open ocean to tap against my brother’s.

“Don’t tell the border guards about squatting,” he said.

“Of course.”

“Or volunteering at festivals. That could be interpreted as working.” He was nervous.

“Really?” I laughed. “I’m stealing precious volunteer gigs?”

“Still.” He took a drink from his can. “Don’t mention my court case either. Say we’re coming back because I have to work.”

That was partly true, but only because Tim intended to pick up some shifts as a paid bartender at events in London in order to replenish his savings. Either way, Tim had to be in court later that week.

“We’ll be fine,” I reassured him.

&

When Saban returned, it was time to take his car to the border queue.

The road wound through embankments and rounded sharpened fences that demarcated British territory on the French side of the channel. In the dimming light, a long line of red taillights hoping to make the next ferry stretched before us toward the border control awning.

When it was our turn, Saban handed our two Canadian passports and his Albanian one to the British border guard. The questions were simple and sparse as they scanned our documents. How long have you known each other? How long will you be staying in the UK? And then it came:

“One of you is already flagged, so we’re going to have to ask you to pull over to the side up there and go into that building.”

“Sorry. I hoped this would not happen,” Saban said as he guided his little car up to the office. “But don’t worry,” he laughed. “You will be fine. You have the magic passports.”

We were travelling separately from Saban, so they asked us to bring our bags in from his car. I felt confident. They’d already let me in when I arrived from Canada, and we had checked everything in our possession for signs of drugs on the beach before we left the Netherlands.

We sat in a quiet room with a short snake of chairs marked off by posts and pull cords that led us toward the counter at the front. The border guards called the people

ahead one by one, sometimes asking them to sit again while they looked up details. The room was quiet enough to hear the conversations at the desks over the hum of engines outside, but everyone pretended not to. Financial savings, marriage statuses, who people were visiting and why—all was read aloud at the counter.

A Northern British woman had been pulled in for the first time and argued with a guard at one stall. If she was a dual-citizen, she was supposed to carry her second passport with her. “This is complete rubbish!” she yelled on the way to her vehicle to look for it.

“Welcome to Dunkerque,” the guard muttered when she was out the door.

The two tall cans of beer I’d drank sucked at my stomach. I would need to piss soon, and there were no signs for a washroom.

Saban was called first. Apparently he had family in the UK as well. He went out with the guards to check his car.

My brother was next and quickly cleared. He had a visa to live in the country. He waited for me by the door.

“How long do you plan to stay in the UK?” the border guard demanded as she reviewed my passport. She reminded me of one of the cafeteria workers from my primary school whose perpetual anger kept the children in check.

“I flew into Gatwick in June,” I said, “so three more months until early December.”

“Do you have your ticket back to Canada?”

“No. I haven’t decided whether I’ll return to Canada or visit Europe again when my time in the UK runs out.”

“How are you paying for your trip?”

“I have these statements showing my saved money.” I handed her the photocopies and realized I hadn’t printed new ones since I arrived in the UK. “I budget pretty carefully, and I do some editing online for a Canadian magazine to maintain my savings.”

“You worked online while in the UK?”

“Just some contract editing for a Canadian company.”

“You’re on a tourist visa,” she glared. “You’re not supposed to be doing any work whatsoever in the United Kingdom. I’m writing you a slip explaining that you’re being detained.”

“What? No.” My brother interrupted our conversation. He was beside me then. “If he’s not allowed to work online, he doesn’t need to. He’s staying with me.”

I stammered, “The Gatwick airport border guard said it was fine.”

She ignored us, filling out a form with my name on it. “I’m keeping your passport, and you’re going to have to talk to one of my colleagues when they become available.”

“How long will he be held for?”

“I can’t tell you that. He’ll have to wait in the detention area until an interviewer becomes available.”

Saban came back in then. He was cleared for entry. I would have to wait to find out.

The guards gave us a moment for Tim and Saban to decide what to do. My bag would be detained with me.

“I’ll wait for you,” Tim said.

“What if I’m denied? You have to get back.” I didn’t mention his court case.

Saban had been in my place before. He looked sorry for me, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything to me. "If we wait, we'll miss the midnight ferry," he said at last.

"You both take the ferry," I said. "I'll hitch a morning ferry if I have to."

"Are you sure?" my brother asked. He was holding my shoulder.

I nodded.

They let us repack our bags in order to split up.

"Take the tent and the highway map—just in case," my brother insisted. I turned down his small cook stove and pot, and we split the bundle of snack food and sandwich ingredients.

"Good luck," he said. "I'm sure you'll get through." It was the first time we hugged without a fight since I arrived three months ago.

"Good luck to you," I said, for his court case.

They returned to the car, and I was led away.

&

A French border guard took me to a different building to be held because the English offices were closed at night, he explained. He brought me into a small room with empty shelves.

"Do you speak French?" he asked.

"No, *désolé*," I replied.

I emptied my pockets at the guard's direction: a wallet, which he leafed through with blue gloved fingers; two pens; a notebook; crumpled receipts; my cell phone, its

battery dead for two days now; a lighter; a flyer for a club night I'd been given in Budapest; wrappers from our lunch that I'd forgotten to find a trash can for; Tim's novel in my cargo pocket that he had lent to me to read, Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris*. "Can I keep this?" I asked.

"No," he said.

He patted down my shirt and pants, squeezed every seam between thumb and forefinger. He asked me to go through my backpack, and he checked each pocket after I emptied it. Sand tumbled out onto the sorting table. "Do you have anything sharp in here?"

"A folding knife in the food bag."

Some things he set aside. Everything else went back into my bag. He wasn't interested in my laptop or cell phone.

"You must sign this receipt acknowledging that we're holding your wallet, IDs, and journal for the interviewer to examine."

"OK," I tried to laugh, "but that's not a journal. Those are notes for short stories I'm working on." I needed some kind of explanation for my notebook.

He didn't seem to care.

He led me to a box-like vacant room with rows of seats facing away from an interior window through which a guard watched. It made me think of a broken-down classroom with no board at the front. Its walls were blue-painted cement that had been graffitied with scratched-in names and initials revealing a pale, yellow paint underneath. There was a washroom, a drinking fountain, and a shelf of reading material.

The beer had become a small, uncomfortable hangover in my stomach. I used the washroom to piss. It smelled like bleach and had no toilet seat. I returned to the fountain

for a drink. Its button snapped down, and a jet of water shot out over the edge and against the wall, splashing into a small puddle already there.

The reading shelf was like a lending library in front of a church community centre: Danielle Steele and other paperbacks with embossed covers.

After I circled the room, I sat down, my back to the guard, and stared at the walls. There was something scribbled on nearly every cinder block. Most of it was in languages and even alphabets that I couldn't read. There were people's names, signatures actually, but the only words I could read were the names of countries written in Roman letters: *Iran. Algeria. Morocco. Albania*—where Saban was from.

Only one scrawl was written in English: *USA. Fuck the UK.*

There were no clocks in the room or hints of outdoor light. Just the faded blue paint, the writing, and the broken water fountain.

I was tired and leaned back against the chair with my eyes closed to pass the time. I tried not to think about how often I mentioned drugs in my notebook. I had written about them surreptitiously, but I'm sure the words "getting high" were in there. I felt too anxious and too hungry to sleep, craving food in my stomach after the beer, but I must have dozed off.

I was stirred by my name being called from the door.

My interviewer was a British border guard who I hadn't seen before. He led me to another bare room where we sat across from each other at an empty table. By his name and his British accent, I guessed that his parents or grandparents had immigrated to the UK before he was born.

I gave him all the details he asked for—my employer, where I lived in Canada—but I didn't know what kind of answers would make a difference. I was hungry,

desperate, tired, and irritated. I pleaded with him that I would stay with my brother in the country and if working online for a few hours a week wasn't allowed, I wouldn't do it.

He asked me to provide my answers slowly, and he wrote everything down. "I don't think the previous guard's interpretation of 'no working in the UK' with respect to an online job was exactly correct," he said, telling me something of my chances, "but my job is just to forward your information on to my superiors who will make the decision. Now, why do you want to visit the UK?"

Why *did* I want to visit the UK? What could I say? Just to hang around a foreign country? To get drunk and take drugs at squat parties?

"Well, England seems really important in Canada. My ancestors were English. We hear about the country all the time growing up and swear allegiance to the Queen, you know, and my brother lives here. So after graduating, I just thought, I mean, I wanted to travel around, and—"

"Slower, please. I have to record everything you say." He sounded as tired as I was. "So, why do you want to visit the UK?"

"My brother lives here."

"What are you going to do for three more months?"

"See my brother and write some short stories."

"What are the stories about?"

"They are travel stories about a Canadian who comes to England—in the 1800s. An historical travel series."

Why did I say that? My notebook was filled with writing doodles about my trip. The sunrise over the London skyline after a short, summer night out. Camping in the

wet grass beside the autobahn. Drinking wine in Budapest's Deák Ferenc square.
Nothing historical.

There was only the click of his pen on paper in the small room as he recorded
my sentence to the last letter.

“Why do you want to write these stories?”

What? Why did I want to write? Why does anyone write? “I don't know,” I said.

“Give me something to record.”

“I think it's because you can say things in fiction that you can't say with facts.”

&

After I was done, he led me back to the waiting room.

The same French guard who had searched my pockets sat behind the glass
window. The same writing on the wall stared at the vacant seats. I was awake now,
awaiting their decision. I wanted to write down what I saw, what I said, and what had
happened. I wanted to add *Canada* to the wall. But the guards had taken my pen.

Egypt. Sudan. Iraq. Somalia.

My pen. My pockets had been emptied. How did these names get written on the
wall?

Tunisia. Oman. Afghanistan. All scraped into the paint

I moved seats, reached out, and touched the blue brick.

Pakistan. Eritrea. Azerbaijan.

I brushed my fingertip along the letters and then curved my nail against the
cinder block. The blue chipped away, revealing sickly yellow beneath.

Kosova. Libya. Türkiye. Syria.

These names and nationalities had been scratched into the paint by people's fingernails.

The two border guards entered.

“The Home Office has reached a decision. You are being denied entry to the UK.”

“What?”

I was stunned.

“It states on this form that it is because we do not believe you to be a legitimate visitor to the United Kingdom.”

I don't remember how I replied in my exhausted state. I know I had tears in my eyes that I couldn't hold back. I know I made the French guard who had searched me look soft in the face at what I said. I know the one who interviewed me looked as hard as his verdict. I said my grandfather landed at Dunkerque to fight for England; even though it was a lie, it could have been true, and it made the tears fall from my cheeks. Everything I knew for the future was north of this border. Nothing was south. Everything we had planned for three months—summer in the UK, volunteering at festivals with Tim, the squat... gone. I said my Canadian passport was signed in the name of the Queen. I searched for justification. I said it didn't make any sense—even if it did. I stopped. I looked around at the names on the walls around me, and I said nothing.

The sky was the starry blue of predawn when they turned me back to the French border zone of Dunkerque with my passport and pack. I walked away along the razor-wire topped fence on a small sidewalk squeezed between steel bars and the roadway.

The night was wet, and the north sea wind was as cold as the metal fence beside me. I followed the twisting cage walls, on-ramps, and roundabouts under sodium floodlights back to the port town.

In an empty doorway under the brightening early morning sky, I found an outlet to charge my phone and put my UK sim card into it. When it turned on, it shuddered with ping after ping after ping.

Where are you? my brother's text from the UK.

What's happening?

Still no word... hope you're okay.

Hey, if they don't let you in, I just heard back from my friend. Hitch south to Paris. Veronique says you can stay there with her. If they don't detain me after my trial, I'll come in a couple days.

I sat cross-legged in the doorway and dug through my bag for bread and pickles to make a sandwich. My notebook they confiscated rested on top. I opened the book on my lap. On the inside cover, I wrote, "This book is a work of fiction," and I turned to an empty page.

Whatever I wrote would be read by the next border guard.

Chapter 13

The sun came out that morning over the wet grass of Dunkerque, but it felt like mocking irony. I could see car after car of vacationing families with back windows packed full of pillows, blankets, and treats pulling onto the on-ramp in the direction of the UK ferry. They sped away, shrinking behind the border fence. The concrete under me did not move. Each step I took could never take me in the direction those cars were going. I was locked to the pavement by gravity. I could walk any direction I chose, but I could never escape where I stood.

I didn't have the phone credit to send Tim a message, so I had to find WiFi. As the sun rose higher, I walked a half circle around town hoping to find a fast food place. I was in an industrial area with nothing for pedestrians. I found a newly built chain hotel. In the lobby with floodlit stone counters, I plugged in my laptop to see if I could use their signal. Customer login only.

A worker in a crisp uniform approached me and spoke first in French and then in English. "These seats are for visitors."

I looked as exhausted as I sounded. I told him the sad version of my story and how I had just been denied at the border. He understood most of it, I thought, but it didn't seem to change his expression.

I continued on that I would like to book a room, but I said I had to log in to my bank to transfer money to my spending account. "And so could I borrow your WiFi password to connect to my bank?" I asked.

That is when his brows shifted and he returned to the counter to bring me a business card with the WiFi login written on it.

Tim had gotten WiFi while he was on the ferry and had begun sending messages to friends. He posted a status about for anyone who could help out. That was when he heard from Veronique, who was an old BeWelcome guest of his from another squat. She lived just north of Paris, and she could host me until the end of the week—five days away. That would be enough time to recoup and make a plan. I just needed to get to Paris.

I checked our map of Germany. On the western edge of the paper were the highways from Dunkerque to Paris. The route was 300km, and it was only mid-morning. I could do it.

I sent an update to Tim, made a social media status cursing out borders and the UK government, and wrote down Veronique's address and contact information. She lived in Villiers-le-Bel along the number --- bus line. If I could get to Paris, I could find her place.

I told the worker that I couldn't afford a room and headed to the highway.

&

After I had filled my water bottles at a garden centre and gotten back to a hitching spot near the port, the sun was high over the roadways and fields around me. The highway of cars pouring off the unloading ferry and speeding toward Paris loomed over me. It was a controlled access roadway that I couldn't stand on. I had to hitch at an

on-ramp only for the few vehicles heading south after they had visited the ferry's ticket terminal.

Every hour as a ferry unloaded, the road above me roared with cars that could see me out their window, but for each ferry, only about ten or twenty cars passed my extended thumb on the on-ramp. I had made a sign that said *PARIS* ☺ and I tried to make the same smile on my face each time a car approached. Through a tan-tinted windshield, I could see a driver shrug to signal that he couldn't help. His seats were full with his family. Most drivers looked straight ahead, pretending not to see me as they accelerated onto the highway.

At one point, a minivan driven by a French woman who lived out of her vehicle stopped. Unfortunately, she was driving toward Germany, not Paris. She hadn't read my sign and just pulled over anyway, she said.

I unfolded my bandana back to cover more of my head from the sun, put on sunscreen, and waited with my arm out. My backpack was on the ground in front of me. I tried to make it visible so drivers could see that I was a hiker.

I held the sign for Paris in front of my chest with my left arm that I balanced somewhat on my hip when cars were too far away to see. I shifted from foot to foot to adjust the strain on my back. I couldn't switch arms. I had to keep holding my right out with my thumb so that I could face the cars.

I was tempted to sit, to leap up as cars approached, but the best chance of hitchhiking was looking fresh and happy. You should smile and make eye contact with the drivers. As the third hour ticked on, I needed to look as friendly a guest for someone's car as I did in the first hour.

It's hard to describe the feeling that sets the longer you wait for a ride. When a driver stops, it's adrenaline inducing. It excites you and sustains you to keep asking even if the car isn't going your direction. When drivers don't stop, you begin to wonder why. You see their faces resisting making eye contact. You see the empty seats beside them. You see that number 75 on their license plate indicates they live in Paris. And yet they drive right past you. Do they think they're too good to help someone? Do they think I'm a threat? Am I worse than dirt on the side of the road, worth not even a glance? If you can resist getting angry at passing drivers sitting alone in expensive cars, then what you feel like instead is the mud beyond the pavement.

Roads look different when driving on them. We are used to seeing them through the front windshield at high speeds. Standing on the side of the road, the pavement and gravel is stretched out in detail. What feels like only ten metres beside a fast-moving car becomes a hundred metres with space in between. Unmoving, you begin to see that every metre of crumbling pavement beside the highway cracks into gravel in its own way, different from the section before. Next, the gravel breaks into individual sprouts and shoots of plants living short lives on the edge of the traffic. It's all unique, and none of it matters.

In the fourth hour, I began to sit down for breaks between oncoming cars. In the fifth, I stopped rising to stand when a car came. I just read from Tim's novel while I balanced my arm on my knee, thumb raised to the passing drivers.

When clouds began to fill the sky in the early evening, I gave up.

I walked toward town. I didn't know where I would go. I passed a car dealership. I passed a sign for a campground. As I walked, I regained a sense of movement. I

recommitted. I needed to find a grocery store, buy some food, and then walk out of town again before it got dark so that I could find a place to camp.

I would sleep through the night, which sounded like what I needed at that moment more than a ride, and I would try again tomorrow.

By the time I found a mini-mart that sold groceries, it was closed. Was it Sunday? I couldn't remember. I sat on the curb in front of it and made my last sandwich. I turned around, and walked back along the road I came on. If I could camp somewhere nearby, I could get food in the morning when they opened.

A cold coastal wind was picking up, and it was dusk by the time I passed the campground sign again. I turned down its road and reached the campground after dark. It was fenced off and there was a guard at the gate.

I told him my uncle's camper van had arrived that day, and I was coming to meet him. They set up a red tent for me, I said. My cellphone was dead, and I asked if I could walk around and look for his van and tent. The guard let me in. I wandered through the campground. Groups of young French people were camped there, sharing beers by their cars. What if I could speak to one group, say hi, and maybe set up my tent with them? They chatted by flashlight, sat in folding chairs, sipped drinks, and played music from the mobile phones. There were accents from the United Kingdom and even a group of girls from America cheering with laughter. There was a group of more than ten men my age speaking German. They would be able to speak English. There were two couples speaking French who watched me as I passed. I walked by group after group in a full circle of the campground. I didn't approach any of them.

At the end of the loop, I saw a small wellhouse near the fence separating two dark and quiet campsites. I set up Tim's tent behind the building and crawled inside. I

had more room in the tent that night than any night before, but I clung to my single foam mat in the middle of the space. Lying on my front with my sleeping bag pulled to my shoulders against the cold night, I could hear the laughter of nearby campers through the nylon walls. I felt a lot of emotions that night, but mainly I felt emptiness.

&

I was woken up at dawn by someone tapping on my tent and saying “*Excusez-moi*. You cannot tent here.”

It was already light out, so I assented to the morning security guard and packed up. On the way out, I walked past the campground bathrooms and went inside. I could hear the voices of a father speaking to his son in German. I went into a shower stall, balanced my hiking bag on the little bench, folded my clothes on top of it, and showered as the sun rose through the opaque window. Clean and smelling like soap, I walked back to the grocery store to wait until they opened.

With my bag newly heavy with snacks and food, I returned to the highway. I wasn't sure of the time when I started hitchhiking, but the sun was already high in the morning sky, and the sky behind it was as blue as the day could be.

I felt refreshed. For the first hour, I stood chipper and waved at cars, smiling alongside my sign for *PARIS* ☺

By the third hour, my legs and back ached worse than at the end of the day before, and I sat down to read with my hitching thumb out, balanced on my upright knee. If the cars would come, they would come. I had food and water, and I had all day to make it to Paris. I was going to read and wait.

In the early afternoon, a greying man with a large backpack came walking up the road toward me. He had white chest hair beneath his sleeveless shirt, and he wore short shorts that showed his well-toned thighs. I stood to greet him.

“Have you been here long?” he asked in an American accent.

“Yeah, since yesterday,” I laughed. I told him that I had been in Dunkerque for two days now since being denied entry to the UK.

I never got his name, but he said he was hitchhiking too. He had been living out of his backpack for three years, mostly walking and hitching. He liked to move about, he said, to stay healthy. He was making his way first to Denmark and then toward Sweden to spend the autumn working in a ski resort. He said they weren’t as busy up there as in the Alps.

With him standing back from the traffic and me occasionally sticking out my arm for an oncoming vehicle, we talked for an hour.

If my spot wasn’t working he said, he was going to leave me there and walk on ahead. He would look for another on-ramp east of the town going toward Belgium.

I thanked him for the chat and shrugged at my predicament. “Nothing’s perfect,” I said.

“No,” he said, “every moment is perfect.”

I watched him leave, humming to himself. He had told me he hummed while he walked to exercise his lungs.

After two hours with no cars stopping, I turned the way the man had gone, and began to walk.

&

As I walked beneath the midday sun, head protected by my bandana, sweat soaking my shirt with as much water as I drank, I decided not to hum, but to talk to myself. If the highway wasn't working with my sign to Paris, I would take the back roads and stick out my thumb. I might only get a ride going 30km at a time, but as long as I was going south, I would be moving toward Paris.

It worked.

South of Dunkerque, a curly-haired woman who spoke as little English as I spoke French pulled over. I knew just enough French to apologize for not being able to speak the language and to ask for a ride in the direction of Paris. I had looked up the second part online. She drove me to the next town and dropped me off on a small rural road with a sign for Paris to the south. The road was lined with Napoleon's trees that his soldiers had planted to shelter marching troops from the sun. The old narrow road had been freshly paved, but it could not be widened more than two lanes because the centuries-old trees, still strong and healthy, hugged the roadway like natural pylons. I stood under them in the shade with my thumb out.

I waited two hours and then got a ride from an elderly man who spoke English. He drove me onward to the next town. My third ride circled the town and dropped me off again under a sign for Paris. By the kilometre marker, I was one-third of the way there.

I waited at that spot for another hour, and the setting sun began to change the hue of the sky. A small hatchback with dashboard lights I could see glowing through the windshield in the twilight pulled over. The young man with a shaved head seemed happy to see me, but we could speak very little of the same language. He motioned that

he would drive me, and we conversed with hand motions as he drove. He put on his music for us. American rap and hip hop pumped out of his back speakers as we turned through twisty French village roads at sunset. I rolled my window down, and he turned the bass louder. I was aglow with the twilight and the light of his dashboard. It sounded like he could take me all the way to Paris.

And then he pulled into a train station. He thought I wanted to get the train to Paris. I thanked him for the ride and got out.

Inside the small town station, the train only went to four destinations, so the signs were easy to read in French. The train to Paris was clearly labelled. It departed in 30 minutes. It would arrive in Paris by 11:30pm, and it would cost me about five hours' work in wages. I was exhausted, and it felt like the decision had been made for me.

I bought the ticket and got on the train.

Inside, there was WiFi. I was able to connect and receive a message from Tim. His court case had been delayed for a week because they were changing prosecuting lawyers. *i'm sorry i can't be there*, he wrote.

I messaged Veronique and checked my route to her home. I could get off the train one stop before Paris and get to her place with one bus. Hopefully she was OK with me arriving after midnight.

On the bus, I mixed up her street with one with a similar name and got off about fifteen stops early. I realized my mistake in the dark looking at the street names around me and checking the route listing on the bus shelter.

The night was so warm, I had to take off the sweater I had been wearing on the air-conditioned bus. I could wait 30 minutes for the next bus or walk fifteen stops, however far that was. I decided to walk.

The moon was not out, and not every street had a light. I followed the blackened streets bus stop to bus stop, which were lit up in the night. At one point, the narrow sidewalk followed a garden field with fencing against the sidewalk. At another point, I was walking along shopfronts, closed, but lit from the street. A police van ahead with its lights twirling was speaking to a half dozen young men of different races. It looked like the police were searching one of the men's pockets. I wondered if the police in France had the right to search without cause like they had in the UK and Germany, and I walked on past. They weren't there to search me.

The next bus passed me then when I was between stops. I had been walking for a half hour. It was probably 1 in the morning when I arrived at Veronique's street. She lived on a crescent of attached houses on a low hill that was well-lit in the dark. In the middle of the night, I climbed to her front door and knocked.

Chapter 14

I had read that Paris is unique to everyone who visits. I believe that's true of every city, but it was especially true of Paris for me. My week in that city was like no one else's. It started at Veronique's and the celestial feeling of sleeping in a raised bed for the first time in two months. Veronique was flat-sitting with a friend at her grandmother's home, and I was welcome to stay until her grandmother got back from Switzerland. The mattress and white sheets in the spare room felt like a spa. The treatment I needed most was to sleep for two nights straight, getting up in the day only to do my laundry and send BeWelcome requests for when I had to leave Veronique's grandmother's home. Between the soft layers of those cotton bed sheets, it felt as if Paris was welcoming me like a returning child.

Veronique was the type of person who always wore clean clothes, lipstick, and earrings. Her three favourite things in the world were glitter, cocaine, and stinky cheese, she said. Cocaine was too expensive, I said. Aside from her love of cheese, she said she hated Parisian stereotypes. I didn't ask what those stereotypes were. She asked me how Tim, Zuzanna, and Bertie were all doing. She must have been only a teenaged first-year in college when she used BeWelcome to crash at Tim's squat last year. She and her quiet French friend staying with her at her grandmother's on the outskirts of Paris were classmates together at technical school to be electrical technologists.

I wished I had more energy to spend with the two of them on my first day when they were free, but I needed to rest. After that, Veronique had commitments during the

day. She had to run errands for her grandmother who would be returning on the weekend.

“If you can stay in Paris,” Veronique proposed in her heavily accented English, “we should go out this weekend.” She knew of an all-night rave.

Tim sent me a message. Zuzanna was coming back to London by bus to join up with him. Gray’s Inn was falling apart, he wrote. The upper floors were sealed off by dilapidated makeshift bedrooms, sushi was rotting in the basement, and there was vomit on the stairs that no one had cleaned up for three days. He was trying to make me feel better for missing London.

if i’m free after my trial, he wrote, *Zuzanna and i will hitchhike down and meet up with you in Paris*. He had gotten a couple work shifts that week at an outdoor bar in order to save cash for the road, he said, and the three of us could go wherever we wanted in September. I still had time before my European tourist visa expired. What was unspoken in his message, behind the *if*, was that he might be in prison.

I heard from Lidija also. She was going to change her plans to come join me in Paris that weekend on her way back to London, and she might know a place where we could stay.

Until Lidija arrived, the rest of the week in Paris was mine.

The first day, I packed a small bag and took the train into the centre of the city. Veronique said that at rush hour, the controllers never checked tickets, and so if I rode in and out with the commuters, I could do it free. Walking around the monuments of Paris with my small day bag, I felt something like a tourist, and I felt lighter already.

The grey sky threatening rain was the same colour as the city’s milky buildings. The Seine river path wound its way between their tall block fronts, over iron bridges and

under the gargoyles of Notre-Dame. The famous church was smaller than I had expected, hiding behind high-ceiling offices and apartments nearby. The limestone buildings of Paris were so close together that every new corner unfolded into another small vista of shopfronts and plaster apartments. Like my first day in London, the newness of it inspired me to keep walking, to drink in the presence of the city, but I found myself wishing I had someone else to drink it in with.

My back and shoulders stood higher without my heavy travelling backpack, my legs were stronger, and I walked much farther than I normally would. Everything was new but uninteresting. Nowhere seemed worth stopping. I could feel the dark finger of depression in the corner of my vision. What was I doing? What was the point of looking at buildings? There was nothing here worth seeing. I felt that I should sit down and just watch the tourists go by with their friends and families. No matter where I went, I couldn't walk away from what I was feeling, but I'd read that exercise helped, so I kept walking to keep the feeling at bay.

The second day, the weather forecast was humid and hot. At Veronique's recommendation, I took the train to Fontainebleau in the south. It was a village, not a suburb, but the train arriving from Fontainebleau to Paris emptied of commuters coming into the city to work. The train was almost vacant in the opposite direction in the morning, but it was still rush-hour, so I took my chance and rode south with no ticket.

Fontainebleau's small village tumbled down from the train station to large palace gardens where I spent my afternoon. At a shop in the village, fresh baked baguettes, soft and crusty, were cheaper than sandwich bread in the large markets, and I used a warm baguette to make my lunch. I crossed a grassy lawn beside fish ponds, finding moss-covered statues hiding behind a grove of trees, and I ate on a stone bench under a marble

muse. The palace, now owned by the public of France, was once a medieval castle and had housed kings from Louis VII to Napoleon III.

I walked, and I laid in the sun on the lawn of the palace. I read Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, a book Henry had put in my backpack to carry, and I wrote in my notebook. That second day I began to appreciate why some people travel alone.

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I had to leave Veronique's before Lidija arrived. Lidija made arrangements with her friends for me to stay with them before she got there. They knew me, they said, from Gray's Inn. Three French hitchhikers came to the squat my last weekend there. Someone else had accepted their BeWelcome request. They took my and Tim's beds for a week after we left and hung out with Lidija. I had no memory of who they were.

What made the city of Paris unique to me continued the night we met up at a free outdoor movie projected on a large screen at La Villette. Veronique carried a sitting blanket, and I brought my hiking bag because I was leaving her place. Using Veronique's cell phone to send messages, we found four young Parisians, a couple years younger than me, sitting on blankets. Claire, Rémy, and Bastien, had all squatted at Gray's Inn after I left.

Claire was a short-haired woman in branded sportswear who had sent the BeWelcome request to us. Rémy was the tallest and the youngest, maybe 19, with long, thick hair that hung over his fresh white tshirt. I stayed in touch with them on social media long after I left Paris. Claire and Rémy would later hitchhike all the way to Iran.

They posted that they were disappointed to learn they couldn't hitchhike across Pakistan to India.

Bastien was a short man with thin facial hair and a buzzed head. He wore a mismatched track suit. He would later post student-quality music videos on social media of his hip-hop boy band performing in nightclubs with choreographed dance moves.

Meeting them on blankets in the park with Veronique, we shared wine, rolled spliffs, and talked about squatting in London. I bought some hash from Bastien to contribute, and I asked him where I should hide it in case I got searched by the police here.

"You take that little baggie, and put it next to your balls." He indicated on himself. They can only search your underwear if they take you back to the police station.

I told them the story of the young men being searched the night I arrived. Veronique was amazed I had walked through that area instead of waiting for another bus. "It's a little dangerous," she said in her Parisian accent about the neighbourhood where her grandmother lived. I shrugged. I wondered if she was right. Stats suggest walking in cities is less dangerous than spending equivalent time travelling by car, but I said nothing. Every city is different for every person.

We watched the 70s American rock musical, *Hair*, about a teenager who rejects The Man to join a hippie commune and grow his hair long. The hash and wine made me enamoured with the movie. I imagined my own grandmother's Pentecostal neighbours in New Brunswick, trapped like I remembered them in the 1980s, shocked by movies about women in pants and men with long hair. Their children weren't allowed to talk to

Tim and I because we were a bad influence, like Hollywood movies. In one scene, the hippies even smoke a dangerous marijuana cigarette.

“I can’t believe people back then were scared of a little hash,” I said, taking a puff on the spliff Bastien rolled. “The tobacco in this is more dangerous.”

“There has been not much change,” said Claire. “It’s still illegal in France. Scientists are researching and finding that weed and other drugs help people with cancer feel good, and they help people with depression feel good, and it’s still illegal because of the backwards phobia from 100 years ago.”

“Of course it helps people feel good,” said Bastien. “Why do you think we smoke it?”

I laughed and smiled with the sensation of the hash smoke slowing down the moment. It did that, and more.

We finished our wine before we left the park and parted ways with Veronique. I was tipsy, but my gushing thank-yous to her for hosting me when I got to the city were fully honest. I would see her at the rave, I promised.

“If you’re going to a rave, I’m going with you,” said Bastien, putting his arm around me saying goodbye to Veronique. It turns out, he already knew about the same rave.

Claire and Rémy went to buy more wine, and I went to get a snack.

At Gray’s Inn, I was often the person bringing back the free food. Rémy remembered that. But it depended on knowing the bins nearby and what time the restaurant closed. At the outdoor movie in Paris, snack stands and food carts were closing then. I didn’t want to rummage through their bins, but Research Chemical

Freddie had told me it was always possible to ask for unsold portions as a place was closing.

A little drunk, I approached one of the carts and said hello. The Algerian man working there spoke better English than most Parisians I had met. I asked him if he had any unsold food that he was going to throw in the garbage. He got a to-go bag and filled it with deep fried doughy cinnamon twirls. Doughnuts coated in sugar. Each one probably cost €2 or €3 when they were on sale a moment before. That large bundle of long, twisting donuts opened like a bouquet of flowers. It wasn't the nutrients I was craving. It was decadent. I thanked him and returned to the others.

They opened the next bottle of wine, and I still had a beer to open. I was too drunk on the journey to remember much more than balancing that bundle of donuts in one hand with my beer in the other and my large hiking bag on my back. Claire somehow navigated us on to a bus and then onward to the River Seine.

Claire knew where she was taking us, but to me, it seemed like we stumbled onto a well-lit riverfront packed in the summer night with picnicking drinkers. The babble of people, laughter, and small battery-powered sound systems spilled into the night louder than the slow city traffic nearby. This was like the Deák Ferenc of Paris, an open city space, owned by the people, where we could gather and meet outdoors while consuming groceries—like our own wine and spliffs—instead of having to pay triple the price to sit in leather-upholstered lounges somewhere gated by bouncers. From old teenagers gathering with cans to young retirees on a date with glasses of wine, all ages were there on the river, joined by a common denominator: alcohol.

We bought more hash from another group younger than us, and our two groups began chatting, mostly in French. I insisted on walking around offering my end-of-day

cinnamon swirl donuts to everyone. To stop the hangover, I said. At one point, Bastien began throwing the cinnamon donuts one by one into the river, swearing at each one in French, and I stopped him because I was going to eat them all, I told him.

We chatted on the warm banks of the Seine until the other groups began to thin. I was out of alcohol then, tired but coherent, and we made our way back to Rémy's third-floor apartment, actually where his parents lived. They were away on holiday on the coast. Bastien slept on the couch, and I slept on my rolled out mat on the floor.

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Lidija stayed with us at Rémy's when she arrived. Rémy had summer school and homework, so Lidija and I went for a walk to the Louvre and a different art gallery that was on her list. Lidija had visited the Louvre when she was in her first year at art school. She didn't want to pay to get into the gallery again just to see more paintings of naked women with wings, she said. Our plan was first to picnic in its gardens beneath the marble women and men she detested.

“Wooweeee,” she mocked like a child being impressed with her hand over her mouth, “a statue of a naked person.”

Because she criticized the statues, I felt I had to defend them. I enjoyed the sculptures here and in the gardens of Fontainebleau. They were carved so beautifully, they looked like casts of people. “OK,” I said, “but what these sculptors did is difficult. These might not be creative, but they are artisanal works of art.”

She conceded only somewhat. She was a conceptual artist, not a sculptor. “Sometimes the name of the artist on one of these great works of art is only the

manager. One person does not make something this big. Then at the end of the artist's career, when they make their greatest masterpieces, they don't even lift a tool. All their workers do it for them. So they are only the creative genius. And what do they decide to make in all their creativity? They make statues of naked women." I had never heard Lidija rant before.

"Let's take a picture here," I said, "like tourists." Other visitors in clean shirts and quick-dry pants were standing on stone blocks in front of the Louvre and pretending to put their finger on top of its steel and glass pyramid for the frame of their companions' expensive cameras. "Stand up there," I pointed.

"We're not tourists," she said. Lidija felt too embarrassed to pose.

"What are we?"

"We're travellers," she said in a long breath like I should already know.

"Travellers can still take touristy pictures," I said, and I got a photo of her, standing on the block, touching the top of the Louvre with her sunglasses in her hand, and covering her eyes with her other hand to make her disapproval known to the camera.

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"We can't afford to go inside," she said.

We could have, but then what else would we have money left for? The minimum wage in Latvia where Lidija was from was a quarter what it was in England and France.

Lidija said she would take me to a squat gallery. It was only five blocks from the Louvre.

We walked through Paris's busy central streets. Beside the Louvre were brass-plated wooden doors guarded by doormen of shops with thousand-euro handbags and ten-thousand-euro suits.

Once we were in a quiet alley, Lidija asked me about Tim. “Do you worry about him?”

His court case was tomorrow, but she wasn’t asking me about his court case.

She was not asking about the squatting or his inconsistent jobs. She knew he was always one of the responsible squatmates, like Sofi. He organized the legal defence to help represent their squat when it received papers. He was the person in the squat kitchen offering to share what he was cooking with everyone else or cleaning up after someone else had cooked. She said he looked out for everyone at their squat like they were his younger brother.

She was not asking about Tim when he was sober. She was asking about him when he drank. She noticed that he was drinking less than usual in Haarlem. He didn’t get that bleary look in his eyes that stared through the floor.

“With all the drugs that we do,” I laughed, “it is probably alcohol that is the most dangerous.” I was avoiding answering her question. “Yes,” I said, even though sometimes I drank as much or more than Tim. And I told her about him not coming home that night in Budapest.

The squat art gallery was an overtaken office building about the size of Gray’s Inn. It had been converted into artist working spaces. The artists had a collective and opened their space to the public for two hours every afternoon. We strolled through five floors of artist studios. One, who drew with charcoal and hot wax, was in her work space, and she had piles upon piles of drawings of figurative faces that she invited us to look through. Her squatted studio neighbour was absent, but his work filled the space too, looming even onto hers. He constructed wire dragons as big as the room that would

never make it out the door. They were scaled out of green and red name-brand pop bottle lids, the same colour in France as in America.

On the stairwell was painted a massive serpent that coiled up through the floors, and among the many slogans tagged on top of it, one read, *We are the poems who live beyond the pages*, in simple block letters.

“This is art,” Lidija told me. “This is life.” She was poetic like that.

The next morning Lidija told me her plan for the day. “Do you want to go see Ernst and Sartre and then go under the catacombs?” Under the catacombs? In the evening, I was going to meet up with Veronique and Bastien to go to a rave. It was also the day of Tim’s court case.

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Lidija and I awoke mid-morning in Rémy’s parent’s living room to a message from Tim. His case had been thrown out. His court-appointed lawyer was on it, he said, and she argued that the crown had insufficient evidence to prove he had the intent to damage a building while changing the lock. He was free.

Tim and Zuzanna were going to leave London tomorrow to hitchhike to meet us. It was Lidija’s last day in Paris. She had a ride arranged with another friend to drive her all the way to the Calais ferry to head back to London tomorrow. I decided to go with her and meet Tim and Zuzanna in Calais. I messaged Tim to tell him.

It became my last day in Paris and one of the most wondrous of my life.

Lidija was as excited as me by the news about Tim. If the hitchhiking went well, I might see my brother again tomorrow. Until then, our day in Paris lay ahead.

“Let’s go see Ernst and Sartre!” Lidija shouted, raising her small fist in the air.

Lidija and I left the apartment early to visit Paris’s famous Père Lachaise Cemetery before meeting up with Rémy and Claire. We bought wine, bread, and hummus for a picnic in the cemetery.

Père Lachaise was a silent island of memories in a city that was full of them. Visitors made cultural pilgrimages to the marble monuments of their heroes, idols, and icons. Jim Morrison’s grave was there. It was covered with lipstick kisses, coins, and ticket stubs left by visitors since the last time it was cleaned.

I didn’t know who the artist and poet Max Ernst was, so Lidija explained. “He pioneered Dadaism!” she swooned when thinking of Ernst, and when she said his name, she let the *r* come out of her like a hungry growl.

For a surrealist artist, his black slab grave was disappointing next to the sculptures and pillars about us, but Lidija had come to spend a silent moment with it. There in a corner of the cemetery we had our picnic. Lidija insisted we save half the wine for later.

Next we visited Jean Paul Sartre’s grave, where his name rested over Simone de Beauvoir’s, buried together, and then on to Samuel Beckett’s, a simple flat monument where I sat to wait while Lidija took a picture of me.

The silence of the large park in the middle of the busy city impressed on me the presence of the corpses beneath the ground and the weight of their lives. Or maybe it was the little bit of wine.

After lunch, we met up with Rémy and Claire on a stone bridge somewhere in the back alleys of southern Paris. While we waited for them, Lidija and I had finished

off the bottle of wine—though my glass was probably more full than hers. They asked if I had brought my flashlight. I had, but Lidija forgot.

“We can share,” Rémy said.

They said they were taking us to a back entrance to the catacombs, the historic skeleton tombs of Paris, but I was mistaken, they said, that was not where we were going.

That was good, I decided, a little drunk. I didn’t want to pay tourist prices to go look at bones, but still, I asked, would there be any bones where we were going?

Rémy explained as we walked through an abandoned train gully covered in moss and exposed to the sky. The catacombs under the church, the part you had to pay to visit, were a small part of the full catacombs. The whole structure was an abandoned stone mine tunnelled by hand beneath the city of Paris in the 1400s and 1500s. Its corridors ran for kilometres and connected strange places, like this abandoned gully, to culverts and sewer grates elsewhere in the city. People who knew the entrances kept them secret because the city was always sealing them up, but officials could never close the catacombs for good because someone could always be down there, camped in the dark recesses of the city. And the city would be liable for anyone trapped, Rémy explained. “Can you imagine the horror of it?”

What we saw walking down that abandoned train gully could have been Paris today, or it could have been Paris 150 years ago. Nothing was from our time. Beneath a long stretch of bridge overhead that went beneath two streets, Rémy found the entrance. It was a crawl space below the wall where we would have to move on our knees over gravel. At first pipes passed through it, and then it broke away from the train tunnel and continued into darkness, he said after looking in. It went further than his flashlight.

We didn't enter and instead sat down outside the train tunnel to smoke a spliff and decide. I rolled it for us. Rémy explained how he had never used the entrance, but he had heard about it. He didn't know we would have to crawl. "Do you want to see how deep it goes?"

We were undecided. We could climb in, single file on our hands and knees for hundreds of feet and end up at a dead end and have to back out.

"We could get lost," Lidija said.

As we sat smoking and considering it, two young men in rubber hip-high boots came walking toward us. At first, I thought they were workers, and then I saw one wore a Ninja Turtles shirt. None of their clothing matched. We exchanged greetings and then they spoke with Claire and Rémy for a while in French.

"OK, we will speak English now for Lidija and Ed," said Claire, and the two men switched also. They were Parisian, maybe only Rémy's age, but the curly-haired one spoke English with a southern drawl. He had lived in Texas for two years.

He explained that they were headed down through this entrance to explore a new exit someone had told them about. They had photocopied maps that we could see, but not copy. The catacomb community was secretive, I guessed. The maps were in plastic sleeves to protect against water. He said some people called them cataphiles, lovers of the catacombs, but the real cataphiles would come down with supplies and live down there for weeks at a time. The two of them went down on their days off just for three or four hours to explore.

They said they could take us with them, but we would have to walk through knee-deep water just to get in, they said. And there was a part later on where we would have to climb on our bellies if we were going to find the exit.

“What do you think?” Claire asked.

I looked at the others. I was prepared to get dirty.

“Let’s do it!” Lidija said, imitating an American movie. She was also a little drunk.

The catacombs beneath Paris were as supernatural as they were solid stone. The little bit of hash we smoked helped me feel their strangeness. We crawled single file on our hands and knees through the first rough stone section, seeing only the back of the person in front of us lit up by our flashlights, and we reached a square tunnel with milky water along the bottom. I carried my headlamp in my hand so that I could see the shadows of the flat stones poking out of the water, and Lidija looked on by the light of our lamps. The height of the water depended on rain, our guide explained. It had nowhere to go but into the stones. Following Rémy and Claire, I took off my socks to keep them dry, rolled up my pants, and put my shoes back on.

The water extended through dark tunnels for over a hundred metres, and we didn’t stop until we got to the end and reached the stone tunnels of the catacombs proper that ran straight into the blackness as far as we could see. With my shoulder on one damp wall, I could reach the other. We passed corridor after corridor extending into the darkness to our left and right. The ceiling varied in height, sometimes 7 feet up, sometimes only 6 feet, and I had to duck as I walked.

The first intersection we stopped at was at perfect right angles. Including the hall we came from, there were four identical directions to go. Pointing our flashlights straight down any of the four tunnels just cast their light into a blackness as dark as our closed eyelids. The two Frenchmen consulted the map.

The walls were cut stone the same colour as the city above. These halls were the negative space of the limestone that built Paris's great buildings, pulled from these tunnels and stacked high above. We stood, buried in the earth, in a space of emptiness, and we could reach out and touch its edges.

We turned our flashlights off to experience the depth, and we saw true blackness beyond our eyes, a shade so pitch it does not exist on the surface. Listening to the halls, the stones absorbed all sound, and we heard only our breathing against the muffled blackness.

“This way,” the Parisian-Texan said.

Vagrants and vagabonds walked these tunnels for five hundred years. Revolutionaries and revellers used them to hide beneath the streets of Paris. Graffiti was spray-painted on some of the walls: faces, cartoons, and names. There was older chiselled graffiti, French words, scraped into the stone. In one room buried deep below where the two cataphiles took us, there was a miniature castle of stone carved from the walls of the room by some frequent visitor from another decade or century. Recent visitors to the castle had left toys, notes, trinkets, melted candle wax, and poems standing guard on its battlements.

After five hours of exploring and playing through those dark tunnels and strange rooms, we came to the place where we had to crawl. We squeezed on our stomachs under an overhang only 18 inches high, passing our backpacks through ahead of us, to another section of the catacombs to look for the exit they heard about. If it was not there, we would have to go all the way back.

I would like to give description of the places we visited that afternoon in the catacombs—the kilometre-long halls that we ran down cawing like crows, the room we

sat in with candles and opened another bottle of wine, the tunnel that twisted through a spray painted night sky, a room so cold our warm and sweating bodies gave off steam that we could see by flashlight—but I was lost in that maze without our two guides.

The cataphile insisted on secrecy. “Don’t tell anyone how to find this place,” he said.

Further beyond the crawl section, they found a ladder ascending more than 50 feet straight up. At the top, there was a hatch. This was our exit.

With our headlamps still on, damp from sweat and condensation, dusty with the white gypsum of the city, we climbed out of the hatch and into the humid warm streets of Paris. We were somewhere north of the river. We had crossed under the Seine. It was past dusk, and well-dressed couples walked by to restaurants for dinner.

The two French cataphiles left, and the four of us sat exhausted in a park and shared Lidija’s last chocolate bar. I took off my shoes to dry and banged them against a tree to get the last of the water out.

I felt like I had conquered the city, and the night still wasn’t over. I borrowed Lidija’s phone to send text messages to Veronique and Bastien.

Lidija, Claire, and Rémy decided to head home. They were too spent to continue with our evening plans, but on my last night in Paris, I went out.

Veronique never appeared, but Bastien knew where the rave was, and we were going partying. It wasn’t a squat. It was a warehouse bar. And they had three sound systems for €10. Bastien and I chugged strong beer from a nearby shop in the street and then smuggled another can each inside the building in our underwear. With white dust still on my t-shirt from the catacombs, we danced. We rolled hash spliffs with an on-break bartender in the smoking garden. I had to use up my hash before leaving Paris.

Bastien bought a half gram of MDMA to split and share with the bartender and someone else he knew. I took just a little bit, I remembered. And because I took the MDMA, I didn't have to buy any overpriced beer at the bar, and I remembered the whole night. We danced until dawn came through the plastic windows of the smoking area.

Bastien and I parted ways down in the metro line as the first trains rolled into the station. I looked at the tile walls of the tunnel. Somewhere through there was the open depths of the catacombs.

Lying on the floor of Rémy's apartment next to Lidija to sleep for just two hours before we got up again, I decided that day was one of the most marvellous of my life. That day, I was going to see my brother again.

Chapter 15

Lidija was on her way back to London to look for a new squat. As long as Gray's Inn was open, she could stay there. The older of the two Spanish brothers who had squatted with Lidija at Barbican, Javier, was driving his old van from Madrid up to London so he could live in his van while he worked that autumn. I finally got his name and remembered it. Javier played in a hardcore band in Spain, but in London, he worked for an office decor company driving their moving van. Javier was dressed in a sleeveless black shirt with an unreadable death metal band name, and Lidija was dressed in a yellow button up blouse in the heat, but they got along like brother and sister. When she first saw Javier, she stood on her tiptoes and pulled his face down to kiss the top of his head.

Paris was different driving away on the raised ring-road in Javier's van, somehow smaller. I had walked those intersections, seen this highway in the distance. The Eiffel tower was thinner from far away, somehow taller. I would come back to Paris, and the city would be different again, and I would be a different person then too. I would have a different pair of trip pants, maybe with fewer stains, maybe with a lot more.

I was feeling the lingering effects of the MDMA, coming down, but after an hour on the road under the summer sun, the excitement of the day overcame my quiet.

Javier and Lidija were going to drop me off at the Calais ferry crossing to meet Tim and Zuzanna, and we were going to decide where to go next. Zuzanna was from Poland; she could live and work anywhere in the European Union. Tim only had papers

for the United Kingdom. He had used up more of his time in the Schengen countries than I had. He had been to Greece that spring. In four weeks, the nights would be getting colder, and he and I would have to go somewhere else.

Javier drove, and Lidija sat in the middle of the three seats. I asked Javier what he thought of Granada in the south of Spain.

He said it was nice. “You can camp in the winter,” he said in his thin Spanish accent, “So there are lots of hippies there.” But he had never visited.

His van was one of the slowest driving vehicles I had been in on French roads, but the same route that took me all day plus a train ride only took us only three and a half hours.

Lidija texted Tim in the UK. He and Zuzanna had already made it to Dover and were trying to hitch a ride onto the ferry. We were just across the English Channel from each other now.

Javier’s ferry ticket for his van was five hours away, but he had an errand to run first.

“Do you want to come with me to the Calais Jungle?” he asked Lidija and I.

Tim had told me about the Jungle, and I had seen photographs online. The Jungle was its nickname both in the tent village and in the British news. It was an unofficial refugee and migrant camp on the outskirts of Calais. They were people, most of them English speakers, who were seeking safety or work in the United Kingdom. They were people who had been denied entry at the UK border. Some of them had signed their names on the brick walls at Dunkerque.

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We parked in a vacant lot with a dozen vehicles near the Jungle. It was just off the highway, but French authorities had bulldozed an embankment of land, like a medieval battlement, concealing the community from the view of the main road. I had driven right by it on the bus from London and not seen it.

The hot noon sun dried the dirt on the hill, and our van kicked up a cloud that drifted after we came to a stop.

Javier was dropping off bags of donated second-hand clothing that he brought up in his van from a benefit gig in Madrid. He told friends he was making the trip, and they did all the organizing.

At the entrance, four French police officers in blue and orange chatted near their van, but they did not chat with us. A church group had donated a row of plastic portable toilet sheds near the entrance. Ten bathrooms for over a thousand people.

Inside was a main street with sturdy tent structures built with steel, canvas, and wood as orderly as any town made of stone. Handmade signs advertised hairdressers, restaurants, tea houses, and even a mosque. Some tents had generators and propane tanks outside tied up with chains. We passed a Doctors Without Borders van and a line of people waiting in the shade of a new open tent for first aid treatment. French hospitals nearby denied treatment to anyone from the camp. That is, Javier explained, unless they were accompanied by a white person. At the end of the street was a water station with a massive tank on the back of a truck that had hoses leading into stainless steel sinks. I refilled my bottle there.

The Jungle was divided into boroughs based on first languages. Everyone in the camp spoke some English. That was why the refugees here were trying to make their

asylum claim in England. That was why the people fleeing economic hardship who did not qualify for refugee status sought to make a new life in England rather than in France or in Germany. They spoke English because they came from countries that had been invaded by England. In the Jungle, they sectioned off into tent neighbourhoods based on their other languages: Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Somali.

We turned right past the water station, and the view of blue tarps and tents extended over the hillside. Beyond the main street, they got smaller and more crowded. These were like squatters' bedrooms, but outside—tents that should only be used for a week at a time repurposed and re-enforced to last months. Javier led us to a short building made of wood and hard plastic that blended in with the tents.

Inside, an American woman, who enunciated like she was teaching English to second-language speakers, was chatting with Asta, the cyclist from the Palestine Solidarity Squat who had taught me about dumpster diving sushi back in London. Javier knew Asta would be there.

“Asta!” I exclaimed and gave him a hug. He was wearing cycling shorts in the heat. “Did you cycle here?” I was joking, but he told me about the bicycle trip. It had rained the whole time. Yesterday and today were the first nice weather he had seen. That’s why the ditches outside were still muddy. He said we were lucky to come today. The camp is much more dismal in the rain.

While we talked, a young boy in the doorway with the slightest moustache on his lip got the American woman’s attention. He was asking for socks. I looked down, and he was barefoot inside his shoes. She apologized to him. “I’m sorry, Faruq. No sock donations have come in today. Maybe there will be socks tomorrow.”

This was an anarchist volunteer shelter. They had a lending library with books and photocopied pamphlets about the border and how to apply for asylum, and across the room was a small propane stove for hot tea. They had lots of secondhand donations, but they needed more essentials, like socks and toothpaste. People's socks didn't last long walking in the rain.

The American woman had been volunteering for four months that summer after she, like me, had been denied entry at the UK border. She had papers to stay in Europe but not in England, where her girlfriend went to school.

Asta had cycled down to stay for two weeks because they were short-staffed.

"You're always helping people," I said to Asta.

"Yes, well, you know, that's what I do," he said more to himself than to me in his stilted Lithuanian accent.

"Why are so many people here at the camp?" I asked.

The American explained it to me like it was obvious. They were waiting to get across the channel by whatever means possible. Those fleeing violence couldn't apply for asylum in England unless they could get to England. The UK wouldn't consider their claims otherwise. It didn't matter that they spoke only English instead of French.

"Do they ever make it?" I asked.

Lidija was silent.

They did, the American woman told me. Just last night a friend of hers called to say he made it. In Somalia, he had been human trafficked, branded, and almost sold into slavery, but he ran from them on foot, jumping out of a moving car. There was a famine in Somalia, she said, and it made people desperate. He made it across the Mediterranean last summer by boat when more than 1,500 other refugees and migrants were killed

trying to cross. They would have been denied at land borders and airports. He had to cross the EU border later in Hungary, near Budapest where I had been, and when he made it to Calais this summer, he waited here for two months, trying to hide in the back of transport trucks or cling underneath rail cars. Two months is short. Some people were there for a year, and people died on the highway or train tracks every month in Calais, crushed under trucks or moving cars.

While I was partying in Paris yesterday, the woman's friend and three men from the camp got into an unlocked truck in Calais. At the border, the driver told the UK guards that he heard people in his truck box. The guards searched the back by flashlight and found the two others, but not him, wedged inside a cardboard shipping box that he had pulled the packing foam out of. On the other side of the border, he had made it. He called the American volunteer to ask where he should go to report his arrival. He turned himself into the UK authorities and applied for asylum.

Everyone at the camp who knew him was really excited for him, she said, and they passed her phone around to talk to him with tears in their eyes.

&

A couple years after I left Calais, after months of the Police tear gassing the Jungle and denying entrance to charities, the refugees were evicted and the camp demolished. The police set fire to everything there rather than clean it up. Bulldozers pushed the dirt embankment over the charred remains of the tents, clothes, and books, burying them. Alternative accommodations were offered elsewhere in France for anyone who wanted to apply for asylum in a country that didn't speak their language. Many

people ended up without shelter on the streets in Paris. In the re-homing effort, over 200 unaccompanied minors, like Faruk, the boy who needed socks, who volunteer organizations were teaching in camp schools, would go missing.

The camp would soon get replaced by other makeshift Jungles elsewhere in Calais, just beyond the UK border fence.

&

“Let’s go to one more place,” Javier said as we stood in the sunlight out front of the volunteer shanty. “Are you hungry?”

It was Javier’s treat. He took Asta, Lidija, and me to an Afghan restaurant in the Jungle. Javier asked the American, but someone had to stay at the volunteer station, she said.

The restaurant was one of the biggest on the main street. It had a central pole like a circus tent supporting a large round room. More than ten people were inside in the shade sipping tea and smoking shisha when we arrived, and there was room for twenty more. Someone had built long wooden benches, like a raised floor, that circled and crisscrossed the tent, separating the tables by back-to-back seats. The benches were upholstered in mismatched cushions and blankets stapled over foam.

Javier bought us a basket of fresh baked noni bread and a kind of Afghan lentil dal on lettuce to share. For himself and Lidija, he also ordered cardamom tea. It was the first restaurant I had eaten in since the chip shops in London.

Lidija’s mood lightened. “This food is so wholesome,” she said.

“Thank you,” Asta told Javier. Lidija and I agreed. The bread was oily and savoury, and the dal Afghani was salty and delicious. “And I’m sure they thank you too,” Asta said, indicating the men working at the brick bread oven behind the wooden counter.

This restaurant too would be demolished by the French police.

&

I met up with Zuzanna and Tim when they walked off the ferry at about supper time. They had just missed Lidija and Javier boarding the evening ferry. I hadn’t seen Zuzanna since my first day in London. She had crossed from Poland to Bulgaria by train while we were in Budapest, passing right by us in the night. Both of them in sleeveless shirts and Zuzanna in short jean shorts, we all looked more tanned than the last time we had met.

“You made it!” I said.

“So did you,” Tim replied.

I hugged Tim again, and laughed when Zuzanna joined in. She jumped up and down until we were all jumping together.

“Do you want to start hitching somewhere?” I asked.

“Let’s talk about where to go first,” Tim said.

We walked to a grass field near the highway and peeled off our shoes and socks. I had brought two bottles of cheap French wine to welcome them with, and we broke the seal on one of the bottles.

“Let’s open one and save one,” I said to Tim.

“Look at this.” Tim unfolded an oversized map. It opened in panels revealing all of Europe—with all major service stations labelled. He had trouble holding all the parts. It flapped in the North Sea breeze, each panel a fish in the wind.

Tim laid the map down on the grass, and we gently placed our shoes to hold down the edges.

I looked over the continent and traced my finger along the route we had travelled. London to Amsterdam by bus. Hitchhiking south through Germany then Austria to Budapest and our cousin Rich’s. Back north through the Czech Republic and Germany again to Amsterdam, proper this time, and Haarlem beach. Then west to Dunkerque, the border. South to Paris with the catacombs, and now back north to Calais. It was such a small figure 8 on such a large map.

I looked to all the edges. Turkey in the south-east, Ukraine in the east, Ireland in the north-west, and Morocco south of Spain. We could go anywhere—except the United Kingdom.

“We have one month left in Schengen,” Tim said. “Where do you want to go?” He took a sip of the wine from the bottle before passing it to Zuzanna. She was waiting for my answer.

“Well,” I began. What had Tim, Lidija, and I said on the beach in Haarlem? “Somewhere with a roof over our heads—or at least no rain so we don’t need a roof. Somewhere where we can find free food from the bins. Somewhere on a beach!”

“Perfect,” Zuzanna shouted, and drank from the wine bottle too.

Tim proposed what I had been thinking: Granada in the south of Spain, the hippie commune that the fire-spinners Julie and Julien had told us about at Gray’s Inn. We had considered spending the winter there later after my UK time ran out. We could

go there now and be a ferry ride away from Morocco if we wanted to continue this trip after our Schengen time expired.

Granada was 2,000km away. I wanted to hitchhike together, but I was outvoted. At Zuzanna's encouragement we walked to the train station in Calais and bought tickets going all the way to the border of Spain. From there, Granada.

Chapter 16

When we checked the internet at the station in Granada, a message was waiting for us from Julie and Julien. They were in Berlin and would be heading toward Paris next week and then to Granada in September.

Take the train or the highway to Almeria and then a bus to Buenaventura on the coast. Walk along the ocean and look for the red stairs. You can ask any hippie you see and they know the way. Follow the path to the beach and pick a campsite. See you in a month!

We could see the ocean sparkling out the window as the train rolled into Almería. The dry heat and the salt in the air wicked away our sweat the moment we stepped onto the walkway.

A street seller clicked his tongue when he passed and whispered at us like a catcaller, “Hashish?” Tim bought a small brown rectangle from him. It was cheaper than in London, Amsterdam, or Canada. And we caught a bus to Buenaventura. Zuzanna spoke better Spanish than us, but Tim was at least able to read the bus signs.

Buenaventura was a retirement town near a cliff with rows of a billion white balconies facing the sea. Below them were boarded up stonework homes on the shore that probably flooded with high waves during storms. Several had wooden fishing boats tied to jetties.

Behind higher and higher plateaus of apartments, each one using the roof of the one below as a balcony, were dull red stairs set into the cliff. The stairs towered over the town. They climbed past the apartments and beyond.

We went into a small shop with inflatable pool toys and postcards out front, and we bought a 5L jug of water. Julien and Julie had said they got great exercise from carrying their drinking water up over the cliffs. “Once you have to carry your own water, you’ll learn the value of every drop,” Julie said.

We each picked out some 1L cartons of wine too. Tonight we would find a camping spot and drink on the beach. Tomorrow we would go exploring and grocery shopping.

At the base of the red stairs was a cafe where a man sat on the patio at his laptop in the shade.

“There you go, Ed,” said Tim with a sharp elbow. “Buy a coffee tomorrow, get the internet you need.”

The sun baked the red tile on the right of the stairs where the shadow of the apartments cut a zigzag down the middle. Even in the shade, we had to stop climbing twice with the weight of our hiking bags. We drank half a litre of water each before passed the apartments. Behind us, the town stretched out beneath construction cranes raising hotels. Ahead of us was a path through small stones, and we lost sight of the ocean on a flat plain of shrubs no higher than our waists. The walking trail was sandy dirt swept by prints of hiking boots and bare feet. It twisted behind cacti and large rocks until they gave way to a view of the ocean far below, blue like hotel pool water, rippling over bronze sands.

The sea was ringed by cliffs and a tan-green hillside dotted with tents, blue tarps, and tattered beer-brand umbrella awnings. The beach at the bottom, where waves gently played in the sand, was the home of tanned primates lying naked in the sun on towels and sheets.

It was difficult to see the way down at first, but from the cliff edge, a switchback path of dirt and rough stone stairs snaked downward. We could hear waves against rocks at the base of the cliff, and above them, only the wind.

Zuzanna hollered out with a long howl, and Tim joined her, arms lifted, howling in the wind.

This was it.

At the bottom of the cliff, we dropped our bags in the sand, stripped our clothes, and raced diving into the crisp, shining ocean to wipe clean the sweat and dust of the road.

&

We set up camp on a flat spot on the hillside that someone else had cleared in the spring—or maybe last year. The previous occupants had carried sand up to soften the ground for our two tents. Zuzanna and Tim had brought another tent. Stones had already been stacked in a low rock wall around the perimeter to keep the ocean wind at bay. At one end was a narrow fireplace with two flat rocks for a pan to perch over embers. We had a view of the ocean and the whole bay.

At sunset, we were eating sandwiches when two men with short beards approached. One wore fairly new-looking hippie pants, and the other had cargo shorts. They asked us if we wanted to go with them up the hill to the discarded food bins of the shop. They were German and had been camping there a week, they said. They didn't know many of the others who spoke Spanish, and they seemed eager to say hello to newcomers.

We had no firewood, so our only plan that night was to sit by the starlight.

“What if we stayed and just slept,” Tim said to Zuzanna and me while the Germans were getting their backpacks.

“Come on,” I said. This was our chance to see where the free food was.

We brought a carton of wine each for the walk and hiked up the gentler hillside for an hour to get to the next town. We walked along an abandoned car lot and up a hill where we could see a golf course in the distance. The next road up was a row of specialty villas, each one modelled on different architecture: Greek, Chinese Buddhist, and Italian. When we got closer to the palm trees on the sidewalk in front, we saw even they needed water piped in to grow. Behind the row was another street blocked to vehicles by large stones. It was paved like a road, but it was abandoned with the recession when Brits and Russians stopped buying vacation properties in Spain, and already its asphalt was beginning to crack. At the end, it just stopped. A road to nowhere.

The Germans took us to one of the best food spots. Waiting nearby were a middle-aged Spanish couple we had seen earlier on the beach. Tim went to ask them for spare tobacco to roll a spliff and to start a conversation with them. As the near-full moon rose over the hillside below us, the workers of a small supermarket wheeled out their trash bins with all the produce and snack food that expired that day: apples, one bruised in the bag; netted oranges, one gone soft; potatoes in a torn paper sack that was no longer sellable; that day’s unsold fresh-baked bread; small blocks of cheese with a spot of mould; more onions than we could ever cook, all tossed out with the clearing of the shelves.

We could eat forever like this.

“How can we cook these?” Tim said. I was giddy and filling my bag with potatoes.

“You can use the pots and pans at our campsite,” said the blond German. A friend of theirs left them the hut that he’d lived in all winter. It was stocked with utensils and cooking supplies.

“We can shallow fry chips in oil,” declared Zuzanna, packing away more potatoes.

“Fried onion rings!” I said.

The two Germans showed us where we could fill empty water bottles at a construction site closer to the beach, and they showed us a spot where they collected scrap construction wood, fallen palm fronds, and dry strips of bark to burn. “You want to burn very little when you cook,” he said, “because everything you burn you have to carry all the way down the hill. You should make a rocket stove. We can show you ours.” The brunette German, Finn, was a civil engineer. He had written his thesis on bridges.

“Bridges?” I asked. That was all I could remember him saying about it.

Walking back down, giddy with wine and the thrill of free food, Tim and I talked about London. He felt like a collar had been taken off his neck the moment his trial was dismissed, he said.

“I felt like one was clamped on the moment I was denied at the border,” I said.

“It’s really there all the time,” Tim said, then paused, staring down the slope.

“You just don’t feel it until you pull the leash tight.” It was something he had read once.

There were no lights past the edge of the street high on the hill above the beach, but the glow of the moon lit up the hillside and the waves cresting in the distance. The moon was so bright, we could see our shadows in the dark desert light.

Arriving home with full backpacks and full stomachs, we climbed inside our tents and fell asleep to the sound of the waves below.

&

We put on sunscreen and laid on the beach all day. The sand grew more crowded in the afternoon with thirty or forty others spread apart and gathered in small groups, but there was space for everyone. This was not a commune, it seemed, but a village, a traveller's campsite for whoever set up their camp—and for some, a permanent home.

A grey-haired hippie with a young dog came down from the hills to stand by himself, practice slow yoga stretches naked in the sun, share a spliff and a few words with another man he knew, and then climb back up the hill with his dog behind him. Four teenagers with a cooler and clean clothes came trekking down the cliff path and spent the afternoon playing soccer in the wet sand before walking back up the same path. Some of the people on the beach knew each other, some didn't. Some sun-worn people from the campsites on the hills sat together under thin sun umbrellas and shared warm beer. A Spanish man with long curly hair and boarding shorts, who seemed to know most everyone, sat on a large rope-tuned drum and played it over the sound of the waves. A woman in a long sun-bleached dress and no top danced barefoot in the sand to the beating of the drum.

Tim, Zuzanna, and I laid on our small towels or turned to sit and chat. We ate a lunch of bread, still soft, and avocados, still stiff, that we had found for free the night before.

The two Germans found us on the beach and joined us. They had tan lines on their waists as stark as Tim and I did. Finn had tobacco and papers for a cigarette.

Tim passed me the hash, and I rolled us a spliff with Finn's tobacco.

"Do you want to stay here until I run out of Schengen time?" Tim asked Zuzanna and me.

"You know, this is really low-emission living," Zuzanna sat, holding the lit spliff while she talked. "You get free food discarded at the market, and you sleep in a shanty that keeps the sun off. That's it. If people did more of this, we could stop climate change."

"If everyone did this, there would be no discarded food to collect up the hill," I argued, but I already knew the response.

"OK, so if everyone did this, we would grow some crops or something," Tim said. "Don't be so lazy."

I imagined us like apes among the cacti and fruit-bearing palms that cleaned the air around us. I thought about the old men competing like ravens for sweet pastries in London. They could live on a beach in Spain and eat for free.

A tanned man wearing nothing but a cowboy hat and sunglasses to keep the sun off came to kneel before us. On his naked torso was a small belt pouch.

"Namaste," he said in an Australian accent. He was bearded, and beneath his sunglasses, he had creases in his eyes that told his age. "People call me Jesus," he said,

and I could see the resemblance to tacky Christian art. “Would you like to buy some LSD for the full moon tonight?” Jesus asked.

My brother began laughing. “Yes, mate, how much?”

He explained that he didn’t make a profit. He bought it and distributed it in order to share the love. The cost was a bit higher than Sofi’s in London. “Do no harm is my motto,” he said in his Aussie twang. “Live and let live. Love and let love.”

“Yes, mate,” Tim cheered him on, and split up the cost of three tabs with Zuzanna and me.

The two Germans indicated they didn’t want any.

I handed Tim some of my euros to total it up. “Are you from Australia?” I asked Jesus.

“How could you tell?” He laughed a little.

“Can I ask, do you have a permanent visa? We’re trying to figure out the best way to stay over here.”

“Oh, I burned my passport last year,” he said, handing Tim the folded tinfoil with acid tabs inside. I must have gawked at his answer. “Yeah, I said, enough of that and that chain around me, you know? I wanted to get away from Babylon, so I burned it. I live down here all year round now.” He sketched in the sand with his finger as he spoke, drawing lines and making large swirls. “Up there, he indicated inland, “everything is the battle of good and evil, you know? The Illuminati and Murdoch’s evil empire. Down here, everything’s perfect.”

Like the man who hummed when he walked. Every moment is perfect. “What if you want to go back to Australia?” I asked.

He rose from his knees to visit the next group on the beach. “Oh, if I did, I’d just turn up at my embassy and say I lost my passport.”

“Amazing,” Tim said, looking at the tabs of LSD after Jesus had left. “Do you want to burn your passport, Ed?” Tim was a little stoned and maybe a little drunk. “You could live here, use the cafe for work. I could go back and forth to London every three months,” he said.

“And I can stay here because it’s the EU,” Zuzanna laughed, as delighted at the idea as Tim was.

I looked at a retired couple who had been on the beach all day, reading, and I looked at the waves glistening in the southern sun. “It’s beautiful,” I said.

I could live here.

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Tipsy on wine, Tim introduced himself to another group saying he was looking to buy hash, even though we had some, and we made friends by sharing the first spliff I rolled. The naked Romanian couple, two Italian women, and one French man all spoke English with each other because it was the only language all five knew. None of them were from Spain. The Romanians and the French man had been living on the beach all summer. The group also just bought LSD from Jesus for the full moon.

When the sun began to sink toward the Mediterranean, we raised our tabs to the sky and put them under our tongues.

While we waited for the drug, Tim and Zuzanna chatted and laughed with the others. I sat on the outskirts of the circle and stared out at the sea.

Could I live here?

They had fallen quiet when I began to feel a sensation like waves tickling my chest. The Spanish man with the drum down the beach began to play, and the Romanian couple rose to dance. I looked at them, nude in the bright orange sunset, and turned back to the sun sinking into the ocean across the bay and filling my vision with a brilliant glow.

This was a home. This was a community.

“This is like Gray’s Inn, but better,” I said to Tim. “The beach costs almost nothing and provides almost everything.”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind carrying your drinking water over a cliff and burying your turd in the hills,” he said, laughing, because he didn’t mind.

When the last beam of the sun winked into the ocean, everyone began to clap, and cheer. “*Gracias!*” one of the Italian women shouted to the sun as if it had given us this day on the beach.

The night cooled as the sun set. The sand was still warm, but the wind was brisk. My skin pulsed oranges and purples, and I felt much stranger being naked without the sunlight. Everyone except the Romanian couple put on spare clothes from their bags.

“I will make the fire!” declared the French man, and he ascended the hill in shorts to bring down firewood from his campsite. The two women giggled to each other in Spanish, one seemed confused, making sense of what he had said, and the other began to dig a pit in the sand for the fire. We were all in our own minds.

The sky had turned dark blue with a slice of pale on the horizon when a crack came from high above. The French man was throwing a whole wooden pallet down the hill. He tossed it from one section of the path to another and stopped at each landing to

gather the splintered wood. "I bring the wood!" he declared over the rocks, and everyone cheered.

Zuzanna put on her long sweater. "I'll go to our campsite to get my long pants and sweater, I said.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Tim asked. He was feeling the drug too.

"I'm good," I said. "I'm perfect."

He instructed me where to find his sweater.

"Do you want me to bring down another carton of wine?"

"No," he said. "This is enough."

On my way up from the beach, Tim called after me. "Go get your passport to burn." He was only half joking, which meant he was half serious.

I climbed up the hill that no longer glowed pink in the twilight, but I could still see the colours fading and appearing. I ascended into the light of the full moon peeking over the hillside at me, and I stopped to stare. Only I could see it. Its light hadn't reached the beach below. I could see the beach still in the shadow of the cliff. As I climbed higher, I could see more of the moon, and its surface looked like another beach, far away, with different hairless apes on it.

On the path, I wanted to stop and stare at every pebble and twig shifting and moving in the moonlight. The closer I got, the more tiny and intricate their movements. But I was on a mission for more clothes. At our ring of stones, I sat down in the sand outside my tent to put on my sweater and pants. I put Tim's sweater over my shoulders so I wouldn't forget it and stared up at the night sky.

The stars shifted and twirled. The moon blazed with golden halos. And the mountains, glowing in the distance with the light of the town, shot fireworks into the

sky. Were these the poems that lived beyond the page? Was this Bertie's blank wall hidden in a gallery back room?

I looked down at my pants. Every scuff and stain vibrated against the tan in the moonlight. This was where an ember of burning hash had singed a hole in them my first night at the hashbar in London. This was where I kneeled in tacky tar on the roof of the Barbican squat my first morning with Tim and Zuzanna. This is the grass stain I got, sitting on the side of the highway in France. I remembered the man walking by, the grey-haired man who hummed while he walked.

“Every moment is perfect,” he said.

In the seam of my cargo pocket, there was still white gypsum from the catacombs of Paris, or at least I thought I saw it there, glowing white in the night. My pants were a journal of everything I had done, every place that had left a mark.

I turned over my wrist to look at the black glowing &. A sign of combinations and connections. A sign of two brothers. It wiggled and swirled. Overlapping. Each line going its own way. Weaving in and out. Like the oxygen that I breathed that had been exhaled by the plants. Like the waves that touched this beach and all the others.

That scrape on my pants—that was where I had scuffed them climbing out onto the rocks on the low river in Budapest. I thought about the river cruise ship in the night. The famous tiny river drying in the hottest summer on record. Their boat climbing the slow uphill slope of the Danube. Its engine burning diesel to churn the waves. The exhaust filling the sky, invisible, and trapping in the summer heat that was stealing the river from under them. Like the cars south of Dresden running their engines to stay cool on the melting road.

I remembered Archie's story about the wealthy poker players in ten-thousand-pound suits who had to walk past a man sleeping on cardboard in the same coat every night. They wore watches worth more than that man would earn in an entire year. *In all your decadence, people die.*

I remembered Jesus, who had given us this day, our daily trip. Do no harm, he said. Live and let live.

In the desert near me, light poured out of the glistening plants struck by the moonlight, and one bush spit flecks of light so vibrantly it looked like it was on fire. "Burning bush!" I said, and then laughed at the words said out loud. I would have to go back to the fire and tell Tim about that.

I could hear Zuzanna and the others shouting on the beach below. I stood up to see them from the hillside. The Spanish man was still playing his drum, but only his deepest notes rose above the rumbling bass of the waves. The fire was burning, casting them in a circle of bright yellow, but they were dancing and cheering upward because the light of the full moon had finally reached them on the beach, the shadow of the hill cutting the fire in half.

We could live here and do no harm. Love and let love. This beach is perfect, he said.

I reached into my bag in the tent where I had stashed it and pulled out my passport. On its cover, the unicorn of Canada glistened gold and wet. It could open some doors, some borders, but not others, not all of them. Beside me, the ocean waves crashed and receded.

I looked out at the Mediterranean dark in the moonlight. On the other side, somewhere in the glowing night, was Morocco. I could cross and find another home there when this one got too cold or too hot.

And I thought then, in the grey night, of the people I had met in the Calais Jungle, in the blue canvas tents on the border. The ones fleeing famine in Somalia. The one who made it to England by hiding in a packing box. Faruk, the boy with no socks in his shoes. The names on the walls. The ones who had survived crossing this sea, in the other direction, to come here, toward me. The others were still here, below the waves.

1,500 faces a year sank in the Mediterranean. Somalia was in a drought. Europe was in a heatwave. A thousand dying in a week in Germany.

Not every moment is perfect. Not for everyone.

I remembered Asta working in the Jungle and the American woman, whose name I never got, who couldn't see her girlfriend in London. I remembered the border guard who gave me back my passport and with his words shoved me back into France. I remembered the Shard looming over London like an ancient symbol. I remembered the woman who slept in her scooter. I remembered what Archie had actually written on the walls of Gray's Inn when he forgot to spell the word. *In all your decadance, people die.*

I put my passport away at the bottom of my bag and zipped up the tent.

I had to go back.

I didn't need a flashlight under the bright night sky. The hillside swam with colours that were not there over top of the moonlit greys. I was not cold, but I was shivering. My feet seemed strangely far away from me, but that meant they could step even further, and they carried me over the rough path away from our campsite of two tiny tents ringed by stones.

THE END

Epilogue

The airport was cold after the sand of the beach. The traffic was quiet without the drum of the waves. The white indoor tiles were too polished. All the people with suitcases looked too clothed. I barely felt like myself wearing my last clean shirt, a bright blue that had not yet faded, but I still wore the same pair of pants stained with smears of campfire soot and bleached by the sun. Families lined up before us with luggage carts. Their skin was red with lobster tans after their week in Granada.

Zuzanna was more tanned than me. Her arms were much darker than her pastel shirt. My skin was still rosy, a bit like the tourists, under my blond arm hair. I kicked off my sandals and put my dusty feet on the cool tile floor.

Tim had taken the train back to London. Our time in Europe had run out. He was going to stay with Australian James and Research Chemical Freddie for a while and then try to find a long-term squat with Bertie and Lidija. Gray's Inn had been evicted. A journalist was there and even wrote about it for a trashy online magazine. The crew tried to resist. Drunken Lyle went around demanding to know who took a dump in his boots. Freddie said Lyle was too drunk to remember that it was himself.

I was flying across the ocean. Back to Canada.

Zuzanna was staying another month in Granada. Her sister was flying in to visit the beach with her the same day I was leaving. They both would return to Poland by train before winter and visit a few places along the way.

“Are you looking forward to a shower?” she asked me.

“I’m going to miss bathing in the ocean,” I said.

“*Cześć!*” Zuzanna’s sister Maja came running toward us. She was blond like her big sister. Her hiking backpack was overstuffed like Zuzanna’s when I met her. It swayed side-to-side when Maja ran with her water bottle and airport pillow dangling from its back.

The two embraced and laughed together in Polish before Zuzanna introduced me to her sister.

“Give me that,” Zuzanna said, taking her sister’s bag. “Ooph! What do you have in here? Stones?”

I picked up my bag to leave. It looked even rattier, dustier, and suddenly smaller next to Maja’s brand new backpack.

“You said to pack for the beach and the city,” Maja said in a thicker Polish accent than Zuzanna’s. “I want to go to Paris!”

“Wherever you want to go,” smiled Zuzanna. She had borrowed Tim’s map.

“You better take good care of our campsite,” I told Maja, “and your big sister.”

“Say hello to Sal for me,” Zuzanna said.

“Good bye,” I hugged her, and I headed off through security.

I didn’t think I’d be returning after only four months, but it felt like the only way forward. I had more editing work to do once I got back to Canada.

I needed a blanket in the air conditioning of the plane. My pants had been worn thin and barely kept me warm. I had to reposition in the small seat to fit my tall body that ached from sleeping on the sand.

I shut my eyes, but I couldn’t sleep listening to the plastic rattle of the engine. Out my tiny window, the orange sun set into a deep ocean that looked much bigger than it ever did from the shore.

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