

5-2014

# My Life in Pieces, Scattered Abroad: A 22 year old East Tennessean Attempts to Take Everything She Has Learned Growing Up in a Small Town and Make Sense of It in the French Riviera—the Côte d'Azur—Which Instantly Felt Like Home

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My Life in Pieces, Scattered Abroad:

A 22 year old East Tennessean Attempts to Take Everything She Has Learned Growing Up in a Small Town and Make Sense of It in the French Riviera—the Côte d'Azur—Which Instantly Felt Like Home

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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The Honors College

Midway Honors Program

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May 1st, 2014

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## Academic Preface

### **Intent:**

For my senior thesis, I have compiled essays that cover traveling to Aix en Provence for the month of June 2103 and growing up in East Tennessee. This project should exhibit my skills as a writer in the nonfiction category. I describe personal experiences, portray characters, and attempt to show readers a world that they may not otherwise have been able to experience. I blend narrative essays with travel writing to show overall how these two components create an intercultural experience that work to inform and answer each other.

### **Justification:**

Creative nonfiction has struggled to become a serious subject in the academic world. Only in the past twenty years has the category gained any type of academic presence, especially in English departments. This type of writing has been subject to criticism because it is based primarily on the author's experiences. Lee Gutkind, founder of a literary magazine, writer, and professor, argues in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Creative Nonfiction*, "We had to fight for funding, acceptance, and an acknowledgement, primarily in English departments. I remember this time [the 1990's] as a time as a time of war—frustrating and exhausting, but sometimes, thank goodness, marked by victories" (Gutkind 1). It has been a constant battle to legitimize creative nonfiction as a necessity in the writing world.

Nicholas Kristof, two time Pulitzer Prize winner, also calls for writing that has a greater impact on audiences rather than just in the academic world. He argues that in many cases academic research does not have the ability to affect readers and reach their minds. In Kristof's article "Professors, We Need You!" for *The New York Times* he notes:

A basic challenge is that Ph.D. programs have fostered a culture that glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdaining impact and audience. This culture of exclusivity is then

transmitted to the next generation through the publish-or-perish tenure process. Rebels are too often crushed or driven away (15 Feb. 2014).

This is a serious problem plaguing the academic world. In many instances, important material is refused because it is not up to par with academic standards. Thus, Kristof is arguing that even creative writing can be of importance because it is more easily translatable to greater audiences.

Jill Lepore, Harvard University professor, also sees the need for a change in the academic world. She argues in her article “The New Economy of Letters:”

They [university presses] need to defend their charge to publish the best scholarship, brilliantly. But they can also publish less, better. They can demand a great deal more from their authors (not least, that they meet deadlines), and give much more to their readers (including books written for a nonacademic audience). Reticence can be conquered (3 Sept. 2013).

She maintains that there needs to be as much as an emphasis in university publishing on forms of writing other than solely research based material.

Like Lepore, I am not arguing that there should be less academic research and writing, but more of a balance of material published. It takes a great amount of time and effort to research a topic and clearly get those researched thoughts on paper. I actually feel I am better at writing analytical essays versus creative ones, which is one of the reasons I wanted to do a creative thesis. Creative nonfiction is especially challenging because it requires taking personal experiences and interactions then putting them into a story so that readers can enjoy it and apply it to their own lives in some way. Gutkind, in an interview for that 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Creative Nonfiction*, speculates that there are “two essential facets of being a writer:

experiencing life and then recreating life” (7). It is our job as writers to express what other people may never get to experience.

However, this is not always as easy as it sounds. If there is one rule that must be followed in creative nonfiction, it is to be truthful, always honest. It is misleading to the reader if the author is embellishing facts; that is what fiction is for. A disastrous scandal occurred when it was found out James Frey, author of *A Million Little Pieces* (2005), had embellished much of his Oprah-endorsed memoir. There must be a fine line between truth and creativity in the nonfiction world. In her instructional book on writing and life *Bird by Bird* Anne Lamott relates her idea of good writing when she says that “good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. . . . telling the truth in an interesting way turns out to be about as easy and pleasurable as bathing a cat” (3). Characters cannot be made up; they have to be met and put down on paper, so readers can meet these people too.

Creative writing, especially nonfiction, is one of the most difficult things I have ever done. For this project, I had to dig deep and spend countless hours picking out my countless memories to be put down on paper. Like Lamott emphasizes, it is a rather long and tedious process. I am one of those people who over analyze everything, which makes it rather difficult to express exactly what I am trying to say to an audience. And I am not an emotional person, but writing demands emotion. Readers need something they can feel connected to. Lamott writes, “But the writer’s job is to see what’s behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words—not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues” (198). It is my daunting task as a writer to create a work that others will read and can take something away, something that will impact them or relate to them in some form or fashion.

Unfortunately for writers, no matter what field we're in, our audiences have become more obsessed with amusement over education. There definitely needs to be a balance between the two. Gutkind elaborates, "We understand that nonfiction needn't be boring or laborious to be effective. It can and should entertain, inform, educate, and enlighten" (12). For my thesis, this is exactly what I have attempted to do: create a collection of essays that inform entertain and, at the same time, reach readers of any audience, academic or not.

### **Method and Overview:**

I have compiled a collection of essays that cover topics as broad as flying, strippers, and high school. In the first chapter "Up, Up, and Away" I write about how I typically love flying, but this particular flight was a different story, and it did not help that the plane was brand new and malfunctioned before we even took off. This essay starts the collection because it is about my flight to France where some of the other chapters are set. It focuses on how I masked my true fears in the form of another fear: the fear of my plane going down. Many people can relate to covering up their true feelings which is why this essay made it into the collection.

The second essay "Aix" is a profile of the town Aix en Provence where I studied for a whole month. This piece profiles the town with descriptions of people and places. It is more a travel piece, taking the reader to many of the sites I visited. It serves the function of giving the reader a visual tour to the town I was lucky enough to call home.

The next essay "Jefferson County" profiles the small, rural community in East Tennessee where I spent most of my teenage years growing up. I felt this was a good essay to add to the collection because it gives the reader a picture of where I grew up and how that may color my experiences abroad.

Chapter four “Transhumance or Bust” describes my journey with a few friends to the coastal town Marseilles in hopes of viewing Transhumance, the nomadic people with their herd traveling to Europe’s 2013 capital of culture. This essay shows the importance of making the best out of any situation, even if it is a letdown. Everything cannot be perfect all the time, even though you may try your damndest for it to be.

The next piece “Mary, Mary, Mother, Mother” is the most brutally honest piece in the collection. It chronicles some of the experiences I have had with my mother and why we will probably never be on the same page. All of these emotions arise because I take a walk through Aix’s historic church. Even though I was thousands of miles from home, I was still thinking about my mom. No matter how far we travel the deepest issues plaguing us still manage to tag along.

“Dr. (Strange)Love” is an account of my evening with some of my American classmates and a few Aix locals our age, including a stripper. This stripper taught lessons of French love which actually transcended into my reconsidering what I had previously thought about relationships. This essay is a bit quirky, but it provides a good characterization and actually proves that vital information can be obtained even in the oddest situations.

Essay seven “Fête de la Musique” is a chronological work that records the events of the night Aix was transformed into a party town. Normally referred to as a retirement community, Aix was alive on this night. It was different side of the city that, I can only imagine, does not resurface many times during the year. This essay is in the collection because it describes the most eventful/frightful night I had in France and gives some cultural details about Aix and its culture.



“Don’t Make Me Go” concludes the collection. I was not happy to leave France, but holidays aren’t meant to last for forever. It is a fact everyone must live with. The only thing to hope for is to take incredible experiences and blend them into our everyday lives, changing how we view where we come from and where we will go.

## Author's Note

Everything in this is a collection of truth, not fabrication. Everything in these essays actually occurred, even if in some cases I wish it hadn't. The content revolves around my time growing up in East Tennessee or the month of June I spent taking ART 375 - Creative Writing and the Intercultural Experience. I love traveling and I am working on my relationship with writing; I am still not quite sure where we stand. This is my first major piece of writing, so I realize that it is far from perfect. I can only hope that as I keep recording my experiences, my writing will continue to improve and reach people around the world.

## Acknowledgements

First off, I would like to thank my parents, Chris Ball and Terry Wilshire Ball Baker, or as she would probably like to be called Tball, for helping pay for my first trips abroad to Italy and Mexico. I did manage to fundraise some of the money but without the funds you all provided, mostly dad, I probably would never have been able to leave the country. Mom, I am so glad you took me to the library all those years so I could check out book after book. I grew up loving to read which probably had a lot to do with you reading to me as a child. Thank you for taking the time to love me and spoil me. Also, Alisa Lemons, a dedicated teacher whose classes I never got to enjoy while at Jefferson Middle School, I owe a great amount of thanks to you. You put together trips every year for students like me so that we can experience the world safely, enjoy different cultures, then fall in love with those places and never want to come back—well that was the case for me at least.

Brittney Alexander, I owe so much to you. You were my travelling buddy for the longest time. We would go on two week trips and never fight which is quite incredible for two teenage girls with raging hormones. So many of my favorite memories, travelling abroad or not, include you, like getting lost in Venice or trekking through the rainforest in Mexico to visit Mayan ruins. Even though we haven't been on a trip abroad in about 7 years, I know our travelling days are not over and I cannot wait for our next adventure.

Thanks also must paid to Walters State Community College and East Tennessee State University. WSCC provides an opportunity every year for students to write an essay with the possibility of winning \$1000-\$3000 in aid to be put towards a trip travelling abroad. I happened to win a \$2000 scholarship which I used towards a trip to Paris, France, put together by the college. I was lucky to be able to spend a wonderful month abroad in Aix en Provence because

of the scholarship money awarded by the Midway Honors program and the ETSU International Education Scholarship. Without the funds awarded, I would have never been able to take the summer course with Kathleen Church in Aix which helped me tremendously as an author and writer.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Kevin O'Donnell, my thesis mentor. First of all, I would like to thank you for teaching the Literary Nonfiction class at ETSU. It still remains my favorite class that I have taken thus far. I can honestly say I enjoyed every single title on our reading list. I think I may even have a fangirl crush on Joan Didion, or at least her writing. And I admit, although they seemed daunting at first, I have never been so thankful to see red marks all over my paper before. Each time I revised my work, I was grateful for the constructive criticism because my "shitty first draft" would manifest into a well-crafted piece of writing. I am truly grateful that you were willing to take so much time out of your schedule for the past year and a half to work with me on my senior thesis. I can't imagine working with anyone else this project. Thank you.

Finally, I would like to thank anyone who takes the time to read this. I, along with others, put a great amount of time and effort into this project. I can only hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed living it.

“Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colors. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.”

—Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*

## Up, Up, and Away: Goodbye America, Bonjour France

It was terrifying knowing that I would be going on this trip to Europe solo. Until this point—twenty-one years of age and four times overseas—I had always travelled with students and teachers I knew. I was heading overseas to take a creative/travel writing course at Institute American University which students from all over the United States would be attending. I had to book my own flight and plan all the trip details by myself. I knew no other students attending the same school I was. My anxiety was slowly rising. I could feel it catching in my throat.

Normally I have no problem at all flying. Still to this day one of my favorite memories is flying into Knoxville from Houston, Texas in 2008 and zipping through a thunderstorm, the speed of the lightning in a race with my plane. You could actually see where the lightning starts right outside your window. It was amazing. However, I was not feeling this same enthusiasm as I was walking toward my gate in sunny Charlotte, North Carolina on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2013. As I boarded my plane, getting ready to depart on a connecting flight to Frankfurt, Germany, the feeling was a bit different. I was headed for Nice, France, where I would stay overnight in a hostel then take a four hour train ride Aix-en-Provence (pronounced X on Provawnce), the place to be my home for the next three weeks. After this I would head back to spend another week at a hostel in Nice.

I have never really understood people who have trouble flying. It is absolutely amazing that people can be transported from one country to another, shuttled across the sky in a matter of hours. Ever since my first trip overseas, I have been completely spoiled by flying. That was 2006. I was fourteen and fresh out of eighth grade en route to Italy. Because my parents couldn't get off work, I had to ride with a friend all the way from my hometown Jefferson City, Tennessee to the McGhee Tyson airport in Knoxville. It would be my first flight ever and my first time out of the country as well. I was on a school trip with about twenty other students, a

few parents, and one very dedicated teacher. It was a quick flight from Knoxville to Atlanta and a long eight hour flight from Atlanta to Zurich. Most kids my age would have been scared out of their minds. I had grown up seeing every year after 2001 flashbacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> make their way to television screens, always reminding people the horrors of flying. I have been on over twenty planes in the past seven years and I still love flying. Brittney Alexander, my best friend (more like sister) for going on eight years, feels otherwise. She has always been terrified of flying probably due to growing up watching too much Nancy Grace or all the *Final Destination* movies. She will still gladly tell you, "I'm not getting on any type of plane until I have a Xanax or maybe three. Flying scares the shit out of me." We have always been opposites and flying is just another thing to add to the long list of enthusiasms that we do not share.

But why are people so afraid? And why was I feeling so anxious about my flight? Hundreds of thousands of people fly every day. Flying should actually be a pretty calming situation. It is one of the few times in life when, for the most part, people are somewhat equalized. Everyone feels completely uncomfortable in those stiff robotic seats; everyone has the choice of two inflight meals (and it doesn't matter which one you choose because you will regret eating it later); and everyone has the choice of flipping through the pointless Skymall magazine (who really needs to buy a Rolex watch on an airplane when the captain is announcing the time and the distance until you reach your destination every hour on the hour) or trying but failing miserably to sleep so that there is a slight chance to beat the looming jet lag. Sometimes if you are on a longer flight and a newer plane you even have the option of spending thirty minutes or so figuring out exactly how you can get your fat sausage fingers in just the right position with just the right amount of force to push the selection button on the mini touch screen for movies.

Then you can scan through about twelve pages of movies hoping there is one that might entertain you for at least two hours of the long flight ahead.

After being on the plane for three hours, the lady in the row in front of me whirled around and scolded, “Stop kicking my husband’s chair!” No please or thank you. I was twenty-one years old not three. I was not kicking her husband’s chair but only trying to navigate my way through the small touchscreen on the back of his seat. There was no telling what she had been saying about me to her husband. Why didn’t he say something to me? Why did she have to be the one to ask me to stop? All I was trying to do was watch *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Even though flying puts people completely out of their element, it is just as relaxing knowing that everyone else is facing the same exact thing. Everyone is complaining about something whether the complaint is out loud or internalized. Of course, this probably doesn't apply to those in upper or middle class seats, but I cannot speak on behalf of them because I have never been privileged enough to sit in that section of the plane.

As I made my way down the aisle to seat 39A, one thing was clear: I had a window seat, again. I love the window seat and nine times out of ten somehow this seat with a window to the world ends up being mine. I am that annoying person who always opens the window shade as we get close to landing, even if it ridiculously bright.

However, my seat this time was also almost completely in the back of the plane. There was only one more aisle between me and the flight attendant's quarters. I had never sat that far back on a plane. It is probably because most of my traveling has been in large groups for school and the flight attendants wanted to keep us kiddies at the greatest distance from their tabernacle in the very back. It was very odd to be sitting at the tail end. The isolation was overwhelming. I looked at all the parents, siblings, and loved ones sitting together preparing for the long voyage.



But there I sat in the back of the plane, by myself. No one to hold my hand or pass me a piece of gum to chew so my ears wouldn't pop during takeoff.

The rest of my family didn't, and still don't, share the same sentiments as I do about traveling. I absolutely love visiting other countries and house wanderlust constantly. My dad could care less. He has only been out of the country once, with my mom when they went to a resort in Cancun for their 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. One day I came home from school freshman year when we had been learning about biological traits passed down and I asked him, "Dad, where did our family come from? What's our heritage?" "Uh, Puerto Rico," he responded. I knew he was just joking but he still didn't give me a straight answer.

My mom always seemed thrilled when I told her I was going on a trip abroad, but her number one question was always: "How are you going to pay for that?" She didn't really care about my desire to travel, which always made me question if I was just wasting my time. Would going abroad actually benefit me in any way, or would I just be wasting my time and money?

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as I boarded the plane to Frankfurt, until I actually sat down and started to look around. As I settled in for the long haul, I noticed there was a distinct smell in the Delta plane—that of a new car. The seat cushions smelled fresh off the factory line. The walls had not yet been yellowed by greasy palms and the magazine pages had not been frayed at the edges by careless fingertips. A few minutes later the pilot's voice boomed over the speakers and confirmed my suspicions: it was a brand new, US Airways airbus jet plane. This of course was great because it meant few people had used *les toilettes* and I didn't have to worry so much about someone else's germs being left in my oxygen mask. But it also meant that I had to break in my seat, and the captain had to break in the landing equipment. I was slightly excited. How many people could boast that they had traveled on a new plane?

The tarmac was ready for us, but apparently we weren't ready for the tarmac. After what seemed longer than normal to wait for take-off, the pilot once again made an announcement: "Folks, uh it looks we're going to be delayed just a bit longer. The safety latch on the door to the luggage compartment is malfunctioning. We have ordered a new piece to be rushed here so we can repair it and get going. It is kind of like when you buy a brand new car. Just because the car is new doesn't mean you won't have to take it in after the first couple of days to have a few things adjusted. But uh we're getting it fixed, then we can be on the way."

We had been waiting for over thirty minutes, and we had no idea how long it would take to repair the door. Immediately doubt and worry began to sink in. Along with the other hundred or so passengers, I had to sit in my seat for over an hour while the plane was being fixed. My mind was running wild with all the other possibilities of things that could go wrong. How many times do they test drive planes? Were the lights going to start flickering on and off at any moment?

It made me think of when my mom used to drive me and my sister to private school, about fifteen miles from Talbott to Jefferson City. For a couple of years, some man parked his car across from the Rusty Wallace car dealership. This car was perched on a trailer, bent to pieces with a cracked windshield. I never really could make out what the sign plastered on the side of the car read, but I remember one word: LEMON. Mom said something about the guy who owned the car was angry because something with the car mal-functioned causing an accident. He was suing the car lot for selling him a lemon. I prayed to God that the plane I was on was not a lemon.

I was sitting beside an elderly woman who looked over at me and demanded to know, "You a German girl?" I can only assume she thought I was German because we were flying to

Frankfurt. She sounded like the spawn of Hitler with her thick Eastern European accent and question asking. She complained over and over again how she would miss her connecting flight to Croatia—her original homeland before her family moved to the United States—if our plane took any longer to depart. Our plane was obviously going to be late, which meant there was a grave possibility that most of us would miss our connecting flights, but she insisted that "we could probably make up the lost time in the air if we just went a little faster." And then all I could think about was *Titanic*.

It was these thoughts of lemons and "unsinkable" ships that started recycling panic in my mind. I was completely overwhelmed with irrational thinking. First the European woman was spooking me out with her deep English then she suggested traveling faster in a plane on its maiden voyage. No thank you. Any excitement I was feeling earlier had vanished. I was on the edge of having a panic attack. At least I had a legitimate reason if I wanted to freak out. My plane could actually malfunction, compared to Brittney's irrational fear that any and every plane we boarded would be taken over by a terrorist.

After the plane was fixed—or at least I hoped it was fixed—we were finally in the air. A certain restlessness remained within me, and I was sure it would not go away until we had safely landed. But maybe I was just lying to myself. Surely I knew deep down the plane wasn't going to blow an engine mid-air then tailspin into the ocean. They test and retest these giant birds before allowing them to finally leave the nest.

It is more likely that I was not ready to leave the nest. I was on a plane, going out of the country by myself. I had been out of the country before, only with my closest friend and other students whom I knew from school. Brittney and I often would brag about how we knew we were best friends. We knew because we could spend two weeks nonstop together, in crappy

hotels with even worse food yet we would never argue. Now I was going to have to force myself to be outgoing and meet new people, something I had never been good at.

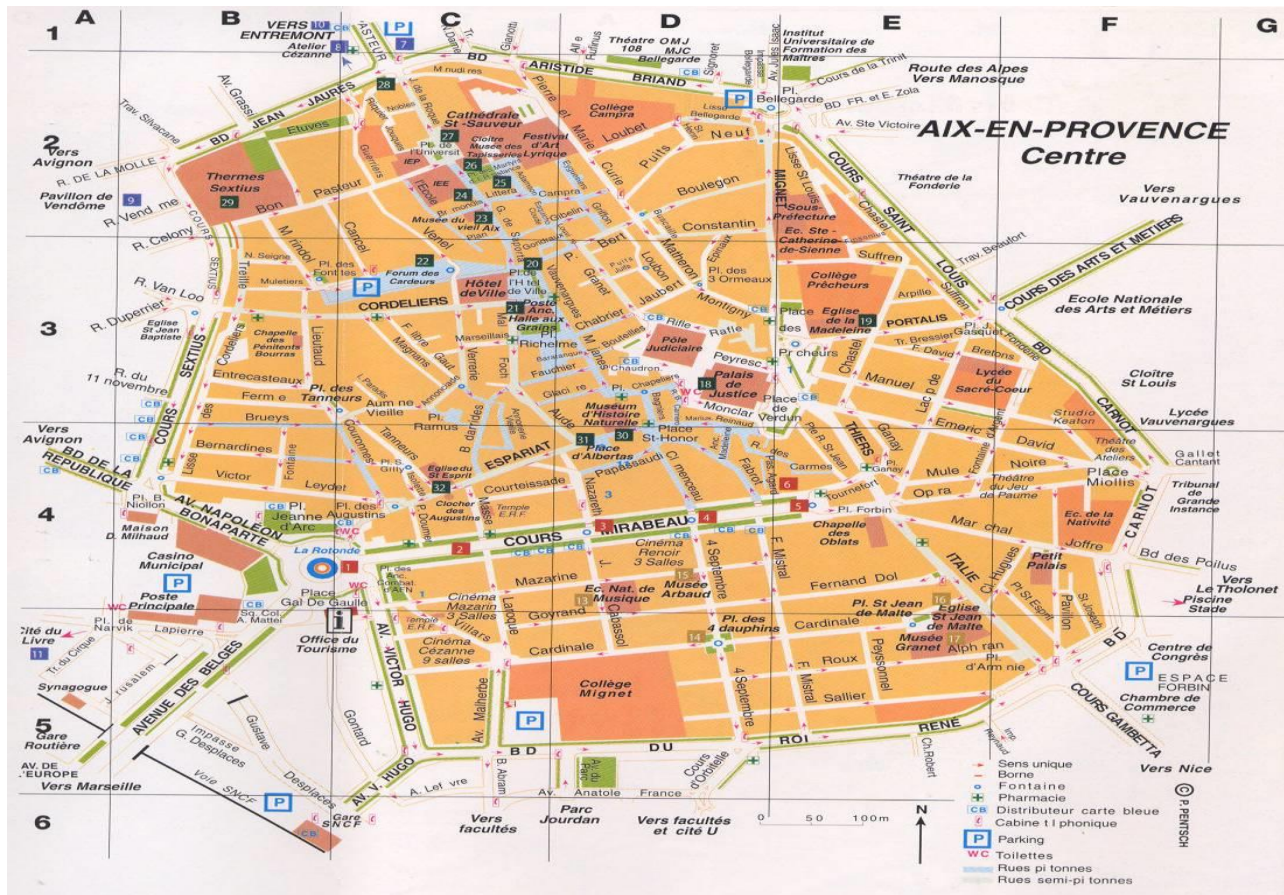
I have always been a recluse, a total Emily Dickinson without the death obsession—unless you count vampires. In my defense, this was the age of *Twilight* and pretty much everyone my age was obsessed with the supernatural creature. I attended private school at Heritage Christian Academy in Jefferson City, TN first through seventh grade. It was the same students over and over, just the four of us every year with the same teacher. Some years there would be new kids, like Ryan whose parents pulled him from public school because his grades were slipping and he kept getting in trouble. Essentially I grew up with the same people for a large part of my youth. I never really had to make new friends until I went to public school for half a year in seventh grade, when I was twelve, and from then on.

There was a pit of anxiety in my stomach that just kept getting deeper; it felt exactly the same as my first day in public school. I recognized the feeling. It wasn't irrational thinking concerned with the plane going down. It was the same feeling I had had about two weeks prior when I was spending the evening with one of my friends, Brittany Piper, at her house. This is a girl who was in the Marines and had even done a tour in Iraq, all before she was twenty-three. We were a bottle of wine in and the conversation was flowing as freely as the rosé. I was preparing my palate for the French wine I was getting ready to encounter. She looked over at me and asked, "Aren't you nervous to be going over there by yourself? I mean, you're going to be staying in a hostel for a week, plus you don't know any of these kids that will be at the school right?"

She was right. Maybe she could sense the fear in me. I mean they train for that type of thing in the military I'm pretty sure. It had been two weeks since our conversation but the

feelings never disappeared. They had only buried themselves deep inside under the mask of a broken airplane and resurfaced when I had no one to run to and nowhere to hide. I usually think of myself as a pretty confident person and it became obvious that I had been lying to myself for the last couple of weeks; I was stuck in my seat confronting the fact that I was scared shitless, maybe not as scared as my other friend Brittney. I sure didn't feel the need to turn to prescription drugs. But I was questioning if I should be going on this trip. I was feeling that at any moment my lungs would collapse and I wouldn't get enough oxygen. Or that I would spontaneously combust. But gradually I talked myself out of those emotions. There was no need to have a panic attack while flying hundreds of miles per hour over the Atlantic. That would only draw more attention. People do this type of thing all the time, I kept telling myself. Tons of students go backpacking and plan their trip as they go, booking trains and hostels as they explore city to city. No real plan neatly laid out before them. Surely, I could do the same.

Finally, after nine hours in the sky, the plane landed in a dreary Frankfurt. Maybe it was just dreary to me because I had been seated on an aircraft for the previous eleven and a half hours counting flight and delay time, and I had just found out I missed my connecting flight to Nice by thirty minutes. Now I had to wait another four hours in the Munich International airport. I could only hope that this rocky start would not foreshadow what was to come for the rest of my trip. If this pilot could get us safely from one continent to another after the tumultuous beginning we had, then I too would be fine. I hoped.



<http://www.bga.org/meetings/2004/planaixc.jpg>

## II

### Aix: My French Riviera Home for One Month

Aix en Provence is situated in the south of France, just off the Côte d'Azur (literally the blue coast but more commonly referred to as the French Riviera). The population is around 143,000 and it is a popular one-day trip tourist town. Aix is a short forty minute bus ride to nearby Marseille, and within about a 30 minute drive to the coast. I arrived in Aix on the 1st of June, 2013. For the next month, Aix was my home. The weather was pretty much better than I could have asked for. There were a couple of days that were a little on the hot side, getting in the upper 80's, but the average temperature rounded out in the mild 70's. I don't recall it raining once; maybe just a light shower one afternoon. The sun was ready to come out every day. When

I returned home, I found out it had rained about twenty-four days in the month of June in East Tennessee. I was glad to be thousands of miles away in the French Riviera.

The thing I cherished most about Aix is that it was so easy to just walk around and lose your time through the winding streets. Most afternoons, if I wasn't at a café writing, I was wandering around every corner I could find, the typical travel cliché. Who doesn't love exploring?

### The People

The town originated in 123 BC, thanks to the Romans on one of their many conquests. Aix was settled because of its close proximity to natural springs, which would later become a site for the infamous Roman baths. Today, the site of the baths is still visible. Its remains can be glanced at through thick plexi-glass put up by the world-famous spa Thermes Sextius, built adjacent to the original ruins, which claims on



Wednesday, 5 June 2013: Remains of original Roman baths

its website to be “THE MOST IMPRESSIVE MASSAGE AND CURE CENTER IN PROVENCE.” It seemed to me that many of the people of Aix mirrored the attitudes of their ancestors, the Romans. The Aixois are very proud. Proud of their culture, heritage, and work. Most businesses are family owned and operated. Some people get up very early just to begin their day. The bakers working in the *boulangeries* wake as early as two or three in the morning. The people of France need their bread! Every morning you can find *restaurateurs* lined up in the bakeries to get baskets of baguettes, which they will later serve to hungry diners. So consistent they are.

Though many are hard-working, the Aixois also place an importance on being somewhat leisurely. The clothing stores and various *papeteries*—stationary stores, yes they still exist—don't open their doors until around nine a.m. It would be no surprise to walk by a store during lunch time and a “closed” sign would be hanging in the door, letting the passersby know the shopkeeper has gone home to take his lunch or run an errand. There are no designated smoke breaks; workers simply step out of their little cubby-hole of a shop and take a puff or two whenever they feel like it, and no one judges them. Most mornings on my walk to class, I saw a city sanitation worker in a large green truck with his window down, smoking his morning cigarette while he hauled off the city's trash.

Every day at three o'clock the cafés are full of people sitting around tables chatting and usually having a cocktail. People will just sit for hours relaxing and people-watching to pass the day away. It is not odd to them to have a mid-afternoon or even a midday cocktail. That is one thing I learned quickly: drinking standards are so different in France, the wine capital of the world after all. The first time I went to lunch in Aix with a few girls from IAU, I ordered a glass of wine. They glared over their menus like I was committing a cardinal sin or I was an alcoholic. I looked at the table beside us and a young French couple was splitting a whole bottle. One morning, I even saw a man drinking a beer at ten in the morning. That would be a bit too early for me, and maybe even for most of the other college students I know, but this guy was enjoying his breakfast brewsky.

The residents of Aix are also very helpful, contrary to what Americans may believe. For as long as I have known, Americans hold the stereotypical point of view that French people are snotty and rude. Of course some are, but I know plenty of people in the States who act the same way—like those people who go to church every single Sunday with a smile on their face yet at a



moment's notice are ready to gossip about the person across the pew. Everyone I met was extremely friendly. It may be because June is at the height of tourist season and Aix depends on its summer visitors for a part of their economy. One of the French guys, Antoine, whom I met through other students at IAU told me, "Aix is a retirement community. It is so boring and everything is overpriced." I could see where he was coming from. A lot of the prices to eat out were rather expensive unless you went to one of the food stands that had what we would consider a \$5 dollar meal deal: sandwich, drink, and chips. That sort of thing, but way better than McDonald's or any other fast food joint.

### Markets

One way some of the students figured out how to save a little money was to shop at the



markets. Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings markets are set up in various squares. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I would leave the apartment for class early enough so that I could linger through the

colorful shaped tents that lined the places. Cours

Tuesday, June 18<sup>th</sup> 2013: Market on Cours Mirabeau

Mirabeau, which is the major street running horizontally

through the middle of Aix, stops all of its traffic and blocks the road so that businesses can set up along the sidewalks and sell their goods. This market consists mainly of clothing and little ends and odds that are perfect for keepsakes and souvenirs. If you take the time to look, you could come away with a great find. I bought four silk scarfs (for the price of one at any of the boutiques). If there is one fashion accessory every woman in France owns, it is a scarf. From Paris to Cassis, women of all ages drape the cool weather accessory across their shoulders, even in temperate weather.

I would also stop by Place Richelme, another square, where the best of French delicacies were sold. You could buy fresh meat, fruit, vegetables, cheeses, and other varieties of food like pasta salads. Most of us students would stop by in the morning and get something to take for lunch. It was so inexpensive but delicious. One day I ended up buying a little carton of strawberries. I was skeptical at first because they were hardly red, more like a coral color, but when I popped one in my mouth, it was like I had stepped into a Willy Wonka factory. It was the best strawberry I had ever eaten. It almost melted in my mouth it was so ripe. I could not believe that a strawberry with hardly any color could be this good. It made me wonder what the hell they put in our American strawberries because there is no comparison. I was ready to go on a strawberry-only diet for the rest of my trip, until my house mom apologetically informed me they were no longer in season. The one thing about this market is that you have to arrive before noon. By then most everything is packed up and the streets are hosed down. This is the only market that gets cleaned because of all the ice that melts from holding fresh seafood. It takes a good rinsing and about an hour of people walking through before the smell finally fades away.



Tuesday, June 18<sup>th</sup> 2013: Market de Place Richelme

On past the market at Place Richelme is the flower market at Place de l'Hôtel de ville. It sets up pretty much every day. I loved just losing myself in the maze of flowers. A lot of the flowers in the market I had never seen before as they are native to the Mediterranean, like fresh lavender. This was probably my favorite market because it seemed as if every time you walked through, something was different. It was the same but different. There were still the same bright colors and the heavenly aroma of fresh cut flowers, but for some reason nothing was ever in the same place twice. Except for this one particular dog. He looked mangy and abandoned. He

always sprawled himself out on the same shelf, second from the top, and didn't move. The first time I saw him I swore he was dead, but after five minutes of staring I finally saw his tail wag. I looked forward to seeing that dog every time I made my way through the shelves of flowers.

### **Getting Around**

I was picked up on Saturday June 1<sup>st</sup> by Caroline Hubbard, my “house mom,” at the bus station in Aix. Most all the students referred to their host family this way. I had a house mom and two house sisters. The bus station wasn't all that impressive, but I knew I would always be able to find it because it was located across from the police station—plus there are multiple signs in Aix pointing in the direction of the *station de bus*. It was a short five minute ride to Caroline's apartment on Rue Avenue Winston Churchill. I thought the man driving us was her husband; nope, turns out he was actually her neighbor. She didn't own a car and didn't want me to have to lug my suitcase all the way to her apartment. Caroline's eldest daughter, Élise, told me that her mother didn't know how to drive and didn't want to because she was afraid of the other wreckless drivers and mindless pedestrians. A lot of people in the city do not drive cars. Buses are quite convenient and, as I learned rather quickly, most everything is within walking distance.

I also noted that all the cars were stick shift. I asked Élise about it when she drove me to the Institute American University. She was confused at first but then realized I was talking about manual vs. automatic transmission. Élise pondered and eventually told me, “I don't really know. Other than the fact that it is REALLY expensive to drive an automatic car in France. There is a tax on automatic cars because they emit more fumes and are bad for the environment.” Expensive they may be, but automatics would definitely be a lot more convenient.

I learned how to drive on a stick shift and I don't blame Caroline for being scared. Cars are constantly stopping and going; people are always crossing the street; streets are randomly

closed. Driving a manual in Aix would be a nightmare. Sure, not driving would result in having to carry my groceries home and to constantly carry an umbrella, but it would be worth not having to worry about shifting gears every two minutes or paying a hefty tax for a convenient vehicle. Parking is extremely rare and gas stations are sparse. In fact the entire time I was in Aix, I only saw one gas station. One. Gas stations in the states are a necessity. Every town—even those out in the boonies have at least one or two. Aix is a pretty popular town there are three different movie theatres within one square mile, but only a single gas station (so having a car is really more of a pain in the ass to have one than not).

That was quite a wakeup to see how non-dependent the people of Aix are on vehicles. I loved it. Every day I walked from my house mom's apartment on Avenue Winston Churchill to our school on Rue du Bon Pasteur. It was a twenty minute walk, but I loved every minute of it.

It seemed that the people of Aix did too. What is not to love when you cross Boulevard du Roi René and see Cézanne's infamous Mont Sainte-Victoire is watching over you in the background. Every day you can see the tip of the mountain sitting there and you have to wonder what is so magical about it that dozens of famous painters have traveled to the South of France just to incorporate it into their paintings.

### **Gardens**

It seems like there is a garden hiding around every corner. You never know when one will pop up. The sign of being in the presence of a garden is a large iron gate and pebble walkways. I would walk into a gated area thinking I would not really find anything but then there



Saturday, 22 June 2013: View of Mt. Victoire from Blvd Roi René

would be a huge park just sitting there, like, “Hey, want to come in and take a look?” That is what happened when I found *Parc Jourdan*. I was just walking around Aix on my second Saturday afternoon in Aix, trying to find a place do some writing. It only took me five minutes after I left my house mom’s apartment to find it. The park seemed really empty at first. The lower level seemed to be all pavement with what used to be a large fountain. Later when I asked my house mom about the park, she said renovations are being done to that part of the park, which would explain the bulldozer I saw sitting out front. I just kept wandering around. Eventually I made my way up the grassy area. People were spread out everywhere. Families, lovers, and teens were clumped in groups all about.

Some people were even sunning themselves in their bathing suits. Back home in East Tennessee most people tan by a pool or on the lake, but the French have a different style. They don’t care if they are in a public park with families around. Really public parks are the only areas in Aix that can be used for tanning. One day, I actually did happen to see some teens in bathing suits looking like they had just left a pool. But we never found this pool. I along with some of the other students wanted to find it because the weather was so hot but apparently it is a very well-kept secret of the Aixois. Either way I found it all very lovely. I don’t think I had ever seen that many people in a park at one time. There is not a lot of green in Aix. You don’t look up and see green covered mountains. There are no rolling Appalachian hills. Public parks are really all the people have to get their fill of nature.

Another park I visited was for a class assignment. Cathleen, my instructor, took me to Parc Vendôme. I noticed right away that this was not like Parc Jourdan. It was very well kept, probably by government funding and donations. At the entrance there was a rose garden full of red, yellow, white, and pink blooming roses. As you walk through the gates, your eyes are immediately drawn to the huge house that sits centered in the back of the property. Cathleen told me the house was built in 1667 facing inwards instead of out to the street so that the man who built this house could have his mistress come in by carriage and no one would see her entering the grounds and speculate. He built this house for her and her only. In the middle of the garden directly in front of the balcony of the house sits a “looking pond.” It is a shallow little thing but the water still remains a pure sky blue. The pond was put in this specific position so that the woman of the house could look out over the pond and see her reflection. I love this park. Instead of sidewalks, there are perfectly positioned gravel pathways surrounded by signs that read “MERCIE DE NE PAS MARCHER SUR LES PELOUSES” or please do not walk on the lawns. Along the wall that guards the park from the rest of the world are benches. I sat for thirty minutes free-writing just looking over the grounds, through the massive plane trees that are lined vertically on both sides of the park. Even though the entire garden is guarded by stone walls, there is no feeling of entrapment. It is extremely private even though it is a public park. Lovers strolled and tourists lingered. I visited this park several times while I was in Aix. It came to be my oasis.

I think the reason I came to adore this city is because it was so different from my home in East Tennessee but it was somewhat similar too. It wasn't overwhelmingly busy like Paris; it wasn't humid like



Mexico; it wasn't unusually peaceful like Switzerland. It was Aix en Provence. When I first moved to Johnson City, Tennessee in 2012 to attend East Tennessee State University, I only knew one person really, Chelsea Ridley. I remember one time she was driving me around so I could get a feel of the town. She said, "Johnson City is just a big circle. You can be on one side of town, make a couple of turns then in a matter of minutes be on the other side of town, then go back a completely different way and end up right where you started. There are five different ways to get to exactly where you need to be." It didn't take long to figure out she was right. Aix was the exact same. Many times I found myself wondering down streets I had never heard of only to end up on the exact street I needed to be on in a matter of minutes. Somehow no matter what side of the world I was on I was finding myself exactly where I needed to be.

### III

#### Jefferson County, Tennessee: The Small World I Would

##### Prefer to Forget but Probably Never Will

For the most part, I can honestly say I had a wonderful childhood. I grew up five minutes from Panther Creek State Park in Talbott, Tennessee. It was on the outskirts of Hamblen County. My mom, dad, younger sister, and I lived in a three bedroom house across the road from a pasture. It was simple, but I could not have asked for anything better. It was the perfect home to grow up in. I played with the neighbor's grandson every day until the bright glow of the street lights became louder and louder telling us it was time to go home.

I didn't have many friends growing up, just the local neighborhood kids and the other students I went to private school with. From first to seventh grade I attended Heritage Christian Academy. It was a school set up by our nondenominational church, Heritage Fellowship. It wasn't the strictest religious institution by any means. People would show up to Sunday morning services wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but that was okay. There was no set ending time to services. We came and worshipped with the Holy Spirit and we left when he left, sometimes not until two in the afternoon.

At times I feel like I missed out on a lot, though, going to a private school. Every year, as I moved up a grade, so did the teacher. I had the same teacher for five years and predominantly the same classmates: the preacher's son, two other church kids, and every now and then a public school convert (mainly kids who had trouble in public school with grades or behavior; most didn't last long).

I never felt private school was weird until I started going to Jefferson Middle School in seventh grade. My family had moved fifteen minutes to Jefferson City just two years previously so that we could make room for my little newborn brother. Jefferson County was really



comprised of lower class and middle class families with only a few families who were above average wealthy. There is a surplus of farmland, which is how many families make a living, growing tobacco and other crops. Others worked outside of the county in nearby Morristown or Knoxville. Morristown used to be a hub for manufacturing and industry but most of those jobs were shipped overseas in the 1990's, leaving many families in the surrounding areas, like Jefferson County, without work. I remember the principal of the elementary school telling my mom one day, "We've got over half the kids on free or reduced lunches." This meant that children attending school receive some type of government aid at home that carried over to school as well. There was probably more tax dollars going to the people in the county than there was money coming out. This is probably why the high school still does not have enough funding to be renovated.

I was at the age, 13, when friends began to matter as much as a good education, so I switched schools. It was hard at first. I only knew two people in my grade. Most of the students had gone to school with each other for years. Friendships had already been made, and boundaries already outlined. I made a few friends, one of whom I actually still talk to, but I was always on the outs. This outsider feeling didn't change much once high school rolled around either.

Jefferson Country High School is a hell hole, and I should've realized it the first day at orientation when the incoming freshman class took up over one fourth of the gymnasium bleachers. Overcrowded would probably be one of the top ten answers for people surveyed describing gold ol' JCHS. You can't tell by just driving down Highway 92 that there are about 12 trailers hiding behind the school, but there are. There were 516 students in my 2010 graduating class and about 2,200 students in the overall school population. This wouldn't have been so bad if the school, which was opened in 1975, had a larger capacity than 1,500.

Sometimes it was a struggle just to walk to class. From the time one class let out, students had ten minutes to make it to the next class. This is the same amount of time I have between classes now at ETSU which has a much larger campus. We just needed so much time to shove our way through the crowded halls. I'd hate to see the massacre that would occur if God ever decided to let the place burn to the ground.

Overcapacity wasn't the only problem with this ancient building either. Everyone knew that the ceilings were filled with mold. One day inspectors actually came in during my AP English/European History class and examined the ceiling tiles in our classroom. This is when one of the girls in class started telling everyone how one day when she came in for summer band practice, "there was a huge pile of black mold growing in the corner of the band room. All they did to fix the problem was vacuum it up then sprayed Lysol." I am not a mold cleaner-upper expert, but I do not think a vacuum is the best option for mold removal.

To make matters worse, it seemed like the condition of the building actually impacted students' attitudes. I wasn't going around inspecting every student's grades, but it just seemed like a majority of the students didn't give two shits about going to school or getting an education. My dad told me when he attended JCHS in the 1980's guys would dip tobacco, spit on the floor, and rub it into the carpet with the heel of their thick boots. I thought surely to God people couldn't get away with behavior like that—until I actually saw some guys doing it in my sophomore Geometry class. It seemed like some of the teachers were there just to babysit us rather than to educate. Half the time I left school with most of my homework finished. Teachers would give plenty of time in class to do homework, but a lot of students used that time for social climbing instead.

So many of the students were disrespectful to the point that it was unnerving. My friend Zeke literally pooped on the bathroom floor, right in front of the toilet just for shits and giggles (I don't know why I stayed friends with the kid, but he wasn't such an asshole when we weren't hanging out in a group of people). After that incident, he was suspended for the fourth time, and it was all students talked about for weeks. The principal even called Zeke into his office and interrogated him about being a member of "the badass club." There was no such club and Zeke was not a badass. He thought he was, but he was actually just an ass. During my junior year, twice he and some of his other friends decided it would be funny to collect a menagerie of road kill and put it in people's yards, including mine. I woke up one day to find a dead possum on a cross just hanging out on my front lawn, just waiting to be resurrected. No one was safe from Zeke's antics.

One day during lunch, I saw two guys get arrested: one for selling weed and the other for buying it. This kid was selling some weed for \$1.50 just so he could buy a PowerAde. One day we had to evacuate the building for over an hour because the fire alarms went off. Why? Well two guys got it in their heads that it would be really easy to smoke a joint in the guy's bathroom. To cover up the marijuana smell, they decided to light part of a t-shirt on fire. I'm not exactly sure what ensued; someone said they stuck the shirt up in the ceiling tiles and caught fire, but that seems too illogical to be true. I do know that smoke started filling the halls and everyone freaked. The sad part is, people did stuff like this all the time. You would've thought it was a monthly ritual.

Not only were there idiots, but there were also the typical cliques that you see in movies. *Mean Girls*, the teenage drama starring Lindsay Lohan, was a huge hit during my teen years, and partly because a lot of it, even if it was highly dramatic, was somewhat true. Sure it was set in

the fictional high school North Shore, but it really was relatable. At one point in the film, Janis Ian describes the scene of the lunch room to the new girl Cadie:

*Now, where you sit in the cafeteria is crucial because you got everybody there. You got your freshmen, ROTC guys, preps, JV jocks, Asian nerds, cool Asians, varsity jocks, unfriendly black hotties, girls who eat their feelings, girls who don't eat anything, desperate wannabes, burnouts, sexually active band geeks, the greatest people you will ever meet and the worst. Beware of The Plastics.*

Every group has their designated place to sit. High school in real life wasn't much different. After the second week of school, pretty much everyone had figured out where to sit and that was your seat for the rest of the semester. Granted the cliques weren't so stereotypically grouped as jocks, band nerds, geeks, preps, etc. but there was a definite clique feeling as to who sat with whom. For the most part, students sat with their friends, if they were lucky enough to have the same lunch period. I always ended up grouping up with people in my class to sit with for lunch. Luckily I always had class with a few people who I knew I could stand to spend 30 minutes outside of the classroom with.

There were four lunch periods, instead of just one like in the movies, because I guess the board of education figured it would be pretty difficult to feed 2,000+ kids all at the same time. Your lunch schedule depended upon what class you had third period and where it was located. Fourth lunch was the worst. It consisted of all the classes in the portable trailers plus a lot of other random classes like band and home economics. Everyone knew it was the dump lunch which is exactly why it wasn't odd to see kids sprinting to one of the four lunch lines, but mostly lines three and four. The first two lines sold the daily prepared meals: spaghetti, burritos, or sloppy joes; it just depended on the day. The last two sold pizza, fries, and chicken sandwiches

every day of the week. Those things gave a whole new meaning to mystery meat. Those sandwiches were a last resort for some of us. They were composed of everything but white meat. There were still lots of kids who gobbled up the highly processed sandwich like it was their only option.

If there was one thing I missed about private school, it was lunch time. Because the classes were so small and comprised of only four students most of the time, we would get up to an hour for lunch because we were ahead of our schedule for the day. We would rush through our packed lunches just so we could savor the time outside playing tag or soccer. There wasn't that kind of freedom in public schools.

If making it through lunch wasn't bad enough, then attempting to get out of the parking lot every day was. Parking was supposed to be limited to juniors and seniors only, but a majority of sophomores got parking permits too once they turned 16 (even if they were supposed to have a justifiable cause like their parents worked and couldn't pick them up or they had an after school job). Either way, parking was a nightmare. There were only three exits: one for the buses and students being picked up (mostly freshman and sophomores), one on the far end of school which the rednecks used, and another which was predominantly used by everyone else. Not many people opted for the exit near the redneck parking lot; no one really even dared to park there unless you drove a pick-up, blasted country music, or donned some type of rebel flag art on your car. It was pretty much self-designated parking at its best. The situation wasn't enforced by bullying or anything. Everyone just understood that the upper left parking lot was left for the rednecks.

High school wasn't completely terrible though. If you were lucky, you would end up having a teacher who actually cared about their subject and made class enjoyable. My favorite

memories in high school mostly consist of Honors English junior year and AP English senior year both taught by Mrs. Hodge. Even though they were pretty intense classes with lots of reading and writing, they were probably the best classes I took in high school. Most people, even students who did not have Mrs. Hodge as a teacher, were scared of her or thought she was a bitch—which she could be. For one assignment we had to give oral research presentations in class. We could choose whatever topic we wanted as long as it was well researched and made a point. One girl did hers on Twinkies, definitely most unique, but what took the cake was Joel Goff's presentation. His presentation consisted of why he thought women were supposed to stay at home and raise the kids while the husband went to work. Basically he wanted Betty Draper as his wife. Mrs. Hodge wasn't exactly an overbearing feminist but she definitely had some tendencies. She lasted about a minute and thirty seconds before she got up and left the room while Joel was left to finish his presentation. She could be downright difficult at times, but she was also the best preparation for college that I could have asked for.

The only other thing really left to entertain us was sporting events. When you live in a small community like Jefferson County, there really isn't anything to do on a Friday night except go to the high school football game. Well unless you worked some mediocre minimum wage job, then you might have something to do. But the rest of us sat either in the Jungle (the student section) or all the way at the other end of the cement stadium where most of the seniors and other popular kids sat. The students and parents would all cheer for the home team Jefferson County Patriots to score a touchdown or make a huge defensive play. But we were just getting our hopes up because the Patriots hadn't been good in years and deep down everyone knew it. Yet everyone cheered on hoping for a miracle. Every now and then we would play an even worse team like our neighbors the Cocke County Fighting Cocks. They probably got their mascot name

from the name of their county, but I bet it has more to do with all the backwoods chicken fighting that goes on up in the hills of the Smoky Mountains. I can remember at least two or three times the local paper mentioned that a ring was busted in Cocke County.

My dad played football back in the 80's for JCHS and he said it was a bitter rivalry with Cocke County. Back then the Patriots were actually pretty good. They won the 3A state championship in 1983 and 1987. Cars would be lined up the highway because the parking lot would be so full, but this was never a problem when I went to the games. There was always parking available. One of the more colorful stories my dad told me was how when Cocke County would come to town to play, all up the highway people would actually hang dead chickens from signs to show the Patriot Pride. I guess PETA wasn't as large and in charge as it is now. These days kids just paint themselves up. A few guys would paint "DVP" on their chests in red, white, and blue. JCHS is located on Dumplin Valley Road hence the DVP—Dumplin Valley Pride.

That is the thing about Friday night football in the American south: it is almost a way of life. Whether your team is winning games or not, you still go out and support them. There were a few people who never really outgrew this. Lindsey Bible who was in my graduating class for example cheered, involved herself in as many activities as possible, and cried when she didn't win Mrs. JCHS. She lived for high school. There were a lot of people like her who didn't want graduation to hurry along because it meant high school was officially over. Most of these kids ended up going to Carson Newman College—the Baptist College located in Jefferson City. It's like they weren't ready to leave. They grew up in Jefferson County, went to school there, and will probably end up dying there. But it is easy to get trapped in a small town. I can't tell you how many girls I went to high school with went to beauty school just so they could get a quick job out of school. So many people get married and have kids by the time they are twenty-one—

and not necessarily in that order. Some girls I graduated with are already on their first, second, and even third child.

Mrs. Hodge told our AP senior class one day, “Only about twenty-five percent of your graduating class will go to college and only about five percent of those kids in college will actually earn a degree.” I don’t know if she was trying to motivate us through scare tactics or what. But I do know that if there is one thing I fear in life, it would be getting stuck in my small hometown, not amounting to anything, working as a Walgreens cashier for the better part of my life. For some people this is okay though because it is simple. It is easy to stay in one place; it is hard to get away from home. It is home for a reason. The familiarity of a place is comforting. Everyday becomes a pattern of repeated actions. Nothing seems to change except the fact that each year you get a year older. It is true—home is where the heart is. But for some people, like me, home is just a minute part of the heart. The part you want to cut out so you never have to look at it again. But you can’t because you can’t live with part of your heart cut out. You have to nourish that part, take care of it. Love it because it will always be a part of you.



#### IV

### Transhumance or Bust: A Journey to Marseilles in Hopes of Seeing Something Unforgettable

The great thing about studying abroad through a set program is that there are plenty of opportunities to take day trips and go to special events. There is no need to plan anything. All you have to do is sign your name on a sheet of paper and pay to hold your spot. The first special event was Transhumance on Sunday June 9<sup>th</sup>. Transhumance was described by the trip organizer as one of those lifetime events. The type of event that will probably only ever occur once.

Transhumance is an occurrence all over the globe.

Traditionally, it is the movement of herds of sheep, horses, and other farm animals from higher pastures in summer and lower pastures in winter. Now it was going to be celebrated in Marseilles. It was organized by Marseille-Provence 2013, European Capital of Culture, in partnership with Morocco, Italy and Provence. This unique European project is for horse riders from Europe and the Mediterranean region who love adventures. The herd departed Cuges-Les-Pins, Italy on



Sunday, 9 June 2013: Advertisement on a building in Marseilles

May 17<sup>th</sup> and would end the route in Marseille, France. On the day Transhumance ended, there was a festival taking place and hundreds of people taking to the streets to see the spectacle.

I made up my mind that I had to go. It sounded incredibly . . . magical. A lady in black riding three black horses would lead the whole procession. All I could picture was the takeover of the city by animals. It sounded like a band of gypsies was coming to camp right in the middle of Marseille. I was sure this was going to be an experience not to forget. So, my friends Katie and Grace made plans with me to go on Sunday. The event was supposed to be an all-day

procession, kind of like when the circus comes to town. We decided to leave Aix en Provence by ten in the morning. A lot of other students wanted to leave at eight, but we knew realistically there was no way we were going to be up that early—it was summer after all. Plus it was only a 45 minute bus ride to Marseille from Aix. No need to rush.

During the week building up to Transhumance, I was antsy and ready to see this parade of animals. I told other students about the event in case they possibly had not heard about it. I asked some of the locals if they knew about it. Pretty much everyone I talked to I brought up the subject at least one time. Something had come over me. I was like the personal spokesperson for Transhumance. I was so consumed with the idea that this was really going to be a once in a lifetime event, like seeing one of those astrological events that only occur every 117 years.

I grew up in a small town, the most eventful thing we got to experience was the Jefferson County Fair. Every year in August, the fair came to town with all its amusements. You paid your \$10 entry fee, then rode the carnival rides or watched the demolition derby and followed it up with a cornucopia of fried foods and fresh squeezed lemonade. Every year it was the same. Sure there was a petting zoo too, but in my mind, I had already decided that they could not compare to the events that were about to unfold at Transhumance.

Sunday morning Katie, Grace, and I met at the bus stop to go to Marseilles. It wasn't at ten 'o' clock either. I had stayed with Katie and of course we over slept. Not to mention she lives thirty minutes outside of town so we had to call a taxi to come pick us up. I looked at her incredulously. Taking a taxi did not seem all that necessary, but we were running behind. We waited, and waited, and waited for the taxi. After waiting twenty-three minutes, I convinced Katie we should just start walking—we hadn't yet discovered that taxis in Aix are just about as reliable as using floss as a bungee cable. We eventually made it to the bus station. Grace was a

little upset because she had been waiting on us at the bus station for almost an hour, and Katie was quite flustered. It was thirty-seven minutes past eleven by that point. But I wasn't too worried because it wasn't even noon yet. We had all day to spend in Marseille, and the animals were not even supposed to make into the center of town until 1 'o'clock.

Katie is one of the most personable people I have ever met. She will talk to anyone and has the charismatic ability to draw them in, which is probably one of the reasons I liked immediately. But at the same time Katie can be unnerving. She and I are so different that there wasn't one day that we didn't have a little tiff over some stupid thing. For instance, Katie likes to have a plan and follow that plan accordingly. For me I prefer to just take things one step at a time. Lunch time was always a difficult time for Katie, Grace, and I. Grace and I both knew that we had to keep things simple as possible which is hard when there are literally hundreds of cafes packed into the little city of Aix. One of us would want pasta or pizza or a salad. Most days we would wander around for half an hour or so just looking for a place to eat, which drove Katie absolutely mad. She would visibly get upset and whiny. It didn't help that she was hungry either. Not everyone is so drastically affected by hunger, but Katie sure was. I learned it is best that when I was with her on long voyages to always bring a snack, something I lacked when we were going to Transhumance.

I met Grace because we both had the same kind of mobicarte, which meant free calls since we were on the same network. Grace is a theatre major at the University of Texas at Austin, and if she wouldn't have told me she was a theatre major, I would've come to this conclusion myself. Grace was always belting out some infamous Broadway show tune, or talking emphatically with her hands. She always had a smile on her face, and she talked in this almost whispery soap opera-ish tone. Sometimes it was hard to tell what was real with her and when she

was putting on a show, like the night our French friend Pierre was taking the three of us home. We had been hanging out with Ryan, one of our classmates, and his house brother Pierre. As Grace started to walk in front of the car, Pierre lurched it forward acting like he was going to hit her. Next thing I know, Grace threw her hands in the air and screamed God knows what with a look of terror on her face. I was just waiting for her to King Kong the hood of his car, but she eventually kept walking, screaming, and flailing her arms every which way.

Pierre, Katie, Ryan and I all thought she was pissed. But when I asked her about it the next day, she simply just smiled and said, “Oh did I really come off like that? I wasn’t mad so much. I just wanted you guys to think I was mad. I never pass up an opportunity to get some acting in if I can.” That is Grace: always a flair for the dramatic.

After the quick bus ride from Aix, we grabbed a Marseille map and began to make our way down to Vieux-Port, the oldest port in town. We walked down the paved streets, passing the kebab stands and souvenir shops. We didn’t even get lost, which was a relief to me because I didn’t want Katie’s ego to take over and go into diva mode. The morning had already gone awry too much for her liking, and I was prepared to do whatever it took to keep her from falling back into a bad mood.

We were getting closer to the water. I was beginning to see sailboats darting at the blue the skyline. However, I found it odd that we still hadn’t seen any animals. In fact with thousands of animals in one city, I was sure I should at least smell them. But there was nothing. Grace looked at me like we were thinking the exact same thing, and we tried to save face as best as we could. We walked around Vieux-Port searching everywhere for something we were sure would be right in front of us. The frustration set in. there was no way we could have missed it. This was the spectacle Transhumance.

Katie was starving since we hadn't eaten all day and it was almost one in the afternoon. We searched up and down the port for a restaurant that wasn't too crowded. We were not in the mood for a wait. We spotted a restaurant that looked pretty decent. It wasn't as close to the water as I would have liked it to be, but it did have a sign out front that said "Moules et Frites €12." Fresh muscles sounded absolutely amazing.



Sunday, 9 June 2013: The best cheap meal in France, mussels

We were seated beside a nice English couple. Katie immediately took it upon herself to ask them if they knew anything about Transhumance. That is one thing about Katie: she will get upset and frustrated if something doesn't go accordingly but she is not shy about asking for help even from strangers if that is what it takes. We gathered from the Brits—well mostly the wife because the husband was stuffing his face with slices of baguette—that the parade had already taken place. It had come through at about nine that morning. The streets were blocked off and the



Sunday, 9 June 2013: Street view of Transhumance

animals made their way from point A to point B, and apparently the lady in black was more like a lady dressed in a better-than-K-mart witch costume. I couldn't believe it. There was no way that this event that I had been waiting all week for turned out to be a sham, nothing

at all like we had anticipated. We thanked the couple for giving us all the information, but deep down we were pretty pissed. Especially me, I had told everyone it was an event not to be missed, yet I could have gone to Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede and seen more action.

I still had questions though. Like where were the thousand or so sheep now? It is not like they could just disappear, and there is no farmland in sight in Marseille. So these animals were being held somewhere. Surely we could still see some of them. That way the whole trip wouldn't be a waste. And about thirty minutes



Sunday, 9 June 2013: The best display of ice cream I have ever witnessed

later, we actually got to see some of the animals. As we were eating our desert—some of the best ice cream I have ever had—we saw huge trucks loaded with live cargo heading past the restaurant out of the city. These trucks were loaded down with sheep! They were taking the sheep out of the city. In fact these animals had not been herded across the coast of the Mediterranean. They had been carried in trucks the whole way. Not to mention numbers were spray painted on the side of the sheep so that it would be easier to keep track of them.

There was nothing nomadic or ritualistic about this Transhumance. It was all a show. We made the journey all the way to Marseille to see a bunch of animals being hauled on a truck. We sat at the restaurant and just took our time eating and relaxing, as most French do. After two and a half hours, we left the restaurant, feeling full of life and good food. We headed for the beach and soaked up all that Marseille had to offer us for the rest of the afternoon.



Sunday, 9 June 2013: Man dressed for Transhumance

It was not the afternoon any of us had planned or wanted. I was completely let down which is probably why I am such a pessimist. The entire week I was looking forward to the spectacle. I should have known something was not right when even my house mom looked at me funny when I was asking her questions about the event. She didn't even know what it was. I hate getting my hopes up. In my

eyes it is better to be prepared for the worse. That way you can see the beauty in the small things, like a long lunch with friends over delicious food or finding out your childhood go-to summer snack, Ice Pops, come in an unexpected flavor in France: mint. When we returned to Aix that evening, my house mom asked me how Transhumance was. I asked her if they sold mint Ice Pops at any stores in Aix.

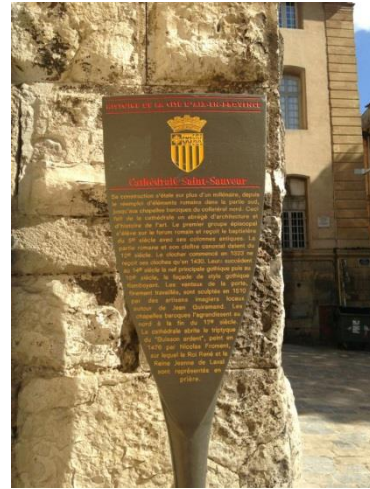
## Mary Mary, Mother Mother:

## Does Your Mom Drive You Crazy Too?

As I walked across the baptistery in the Cathedral St. Sauveur on my last Wednesday in Aix, it was easy to imagine the countless people who have crossed under the sun-carved dome into the cleansing water. People who were searching for salvation by crossing from east to west, from the dark into the light. People who greatly wanted the religious salvation that the Catholic priests promised. The baptistery today remains only as a reminder of what spiritual healing the ancient ancestors of Aix-en-Provence searched for. But all it is now is a shallow pit in the ground.

I looked down into pit that used to hold the holy water where people crossed, and I imagined myself looking into a pool of water and tried to reflect back on my own life and what type of awakening—spiritual or not—I have encountered. There is one moment of enlightenment that comes to mind. It is not sexual like Edna Pontellier, or economic like that of a Dickens novel. No, it is something of family angst, right out of a Faulkner novel. All I kept thinking about was how much I really dislike my mother.

I was not about to go into a fit and start destroying any of the artwork the way the infamous Laszlo Toth destroyed Michelangelo's Pieta at the Vatican, although I could easily understand what drove him to the point of wanting to destroy this great work of religious art. The catholic cathedrals are designed to be overwhelming so that churchgoers feel the enormity of God's powers. The ceilings are shaped to keep you looking up towards heaven. But what I find most interesting is the representations of Mary in the Catholic Church. She is everywhere, like God is supposed to be everywhere and like Santa knows what you are always up to.



Wednesday, 19 June 2013: Sign describing Cathedral



Mary, Mary, Mary. Mother, mother, mother. I can't remember the exact moment when I started hating my mother but it could not have been too far off from October of my junior year in high school when I was sixteen. I was grounded. A few weeks prior my mom had been snooping through my room to ground me from my own debit card, but what she found was something else: an empty pack of Marlboro smooths and the tobacco pipe I had gotten in Mexico a year before. My friend Brittney and I both got one. We were in our teens and tried marijuana, like most of the other people my age I knew. Brittney said it was a lot safer to buy a pipe to use instead of making a bong out of a plastic bottle every time.

After my mom found the paraphernalia in my room, I begged her not to tell my dad and she promised she wouldn't. But, a couple of hours later when he returned home from work, he was calling my name to come upstairs. His voice was not angry, but rather, full of disappointment. Of course I got the whole lecture about using drugs, dropping out of high school, and etc. What was surprising was that my dad looked at me and said, "I am more upset about the empty pack of cigarettes [which were not even mine in the first place] than I am about the pipe." Meanwhile, I was more upset that my mom had blatantly lied to my face and broke my trust than about the fact that I was being grounded. No phone, no social life, and no driving anywhere except for to and from school for 3 months. "No problem," I said when my dad delivered the verdict.

About three weeks into my grounding around October 2008 was when the gas crisis was hitting hard. Gas was almost \$4.00 per gallon and everyone that Friday at school was talking about how several gas stations had already run out of gas. My car was running on empty—typical high school student—and I decided to go after school to fill up. I returned home at 4:15 and my mom was flipping out. "Where have you been?" she said. "I know you get out of class at

3:20 and it doesn't take an hour to get home!" I tried to explain to her the gas situation but she wouldn't even listen to my side. "You've ruined all our plans for the day. We were supposed to take your cousin to the mall so she could fill out some job applications then we were going to go eat and watch the football game." I was absolutely certain that when I left the house that morning for school, I had no plans for the evening other than staying at home and watching television or reading. I was grounded after all. But that was usual. It always seemed like there were plans being made that included me that I would not find out about until hours before said plans were set to take place.

She further questioned me, "We'll why didn't you call to let me know?" Hey, over here, you know this girl? She was grounded from her cellphone! "We'll why didn't you use somebody's at the gas station?" She could not grasp the concept that it would have been absolutely mortifying to ask to borrow someone's phone at the gas station just like she couldn't grasp that I felt like I was not at all in the wrong. The arguing ensued into a yelling match and did not stop until my dad came home at five o'clock. I looked him in the eye and yelled, "I fucking hate her and I can't fucking live with her anymore!"

It was the first time I had ever cussed in front of my dad. I still don't know what he thought about it. I just know he wasn't mad at me. These were the thoughts that plagued my mind as I made my way through the church. I wasn't thinking about God or piety, but my own mother. The church sits right at the end of *Rue Bon Pasteur* where my school is located, yet somehow I managed to avoid going in it for almost three weeks. The only reason I was in the church that day was because my writing instructor wanted me to tour the church and write about a reaction I had. I assumed she was going to be surprised by my response.

St. Sauveur is the only church I saw while I was in Aix. Quite different from the South where I grew up. In Jefferson City I would even say there were more churches than stoplights. It wasn't hard refraining from visiting the church. I have never really been religious. And church just seems like, at least in The States, another way to reaffirm social status rather than the true meaning behind Christianity. I am sure I would have made it into the cathedral eventually, even if my instructor hadn't made me. But maybe not.

It's just that Mary is everywhere in the Catholic Church, and why shouldn't she be? I am sure she was an outstanding mother. She suffered ridicule yet persisted with her pregnancy. She raised the man who is now the worshipped Son of God. She is a support system, which is why so many people put their faith in her: the mother of Christ.

By the end of my junior year of high school about six months after I was grounded, family life got real difficult. My mom and dad were divorcing and filing for bankruptcy. Not even a year later, my mom was in Texas and my dad was laid up in bed trying to self-detox. I had known something was wrong with my dad, but I didn't find out until three years later that he was shooting up Roxy's, Roxycodone, every day. I knew it was bad when my Mamaw and Aunt Kim started bringing groceries to the house every week. I had to raise my younger sister and brother for the next year. I scheduled my own senior pictures and filled out my own college applications. My senior year of high school was filled with stress and worry. I had to sell my American Girl doll collection that I had had for almost ten years, since I was eight, just to be able to have money to buy a prom dress.

The organ boomed as I sat in one of the pews in the church. It was the first time I had ever been in a church while someone was practicing the huge musical instrument. It was somber and echoed my mood exactly. I looked around at all the old paintings, wondering how many

people had visited this very church, praying to Mary so that she would relay the prayer to her son. She looks out for his followers. I blamed my mom for a long time for the collapse of our family, for forcing me to grow up in a matter of minutes, for basically anything I could blame her for. She should have been there for my dad, my sister, my brother, and for me. But parents make mistakes. I'm sure Mary made a few; they just probably didn't make it into the many pages of *The Bible*.



Monday, 10 June 2013: Outside Cathedral St. Sauveur

## VI

### Dr. (Strange)Love: How a Stripper in Aix Made Me Reconsider

#### Everything I Knew About Relationships

I have never really been good at relationships. There are only a few people I would consider friends and I have known most of them for at least three years. When it comes to guys, I didn't even have my first serious relationship—which I would say consists of dating for a minimum of three months—until I was a senior in high school. Most of the kids I went to school with were breaking hearts and taking names like it was the popular thing to do. There wasn't a week that would go by when some girl wasn't arguing with another girl in the hallway over a guy, or two guys would break out in a fight for the right to some girl, no she probably didn't have a say in the matter either. Talk about *The Young and the Restless*.

I remember how most of my friends acted when I told them I was dating someone. “I never really pictured you dating anyone. I mean, I thought you would be the person to live in a big city and have a great job. But I never really pictured you having a boyfriend,” Becca, one of my best friends in high school, told me as we walked to lunch. I think she may have been living in the world of *Sex and the City*, but I was and am still not Samantha Jones. I couldn't help wondering, though: did people think I was undateable?

I don't think it was because I was terribly unattractive. But then again, with Americans and their concept of beauty, there probably are not a lot of people who fit into the attractive category by most standards. I think it had more to do with the fact that I really didn't have a personality which is something I have always been rather self-conscious about. I am not outgoing, and for the most part I internalize and overthink everything. But I met someone this summer in Aix who helped me put this all in perspective.

I met a male stripper the night of June 11<sup>th</sup> while in Aix. Well, I was not fully aware that he was an actual stripper until after an hour of conversation with him. To be clear: I wasn't at a strip club watching men gyrate their oiled-down bodies, and he didn't expect to me to start showering him with dollar bills. Grace, Katie, Ryan, and I were at Antoine's apartment. We met Antoine through Mike, another IAU student like ourselves. I didn't particularly care for Mike. He had a terrible attitude and thought he was practically a descendant of God just because he is from Miami, FL. I hadn't met Antoine before as he was a local guy, but he was having a little soirée with some other people our age. We were stoked to be invited. It was getting late for a Tuesday school night and we had class the next day, but most of us didn't get the opportunity to interact with other French students casually like this. So we decided to stay and mingle with Antoine and his friends.

Antoine's apartment was on the first floor and you could easily look out the huge window overlooking the street and see the Greek deli below. (I love this about Aix, and most other European cities: every house, hotel, or apartment I had been to either had huge windows or balconies overlooking the people-filled streets). Horror masks and Jedi costumes littered the living room. Stationed in the corner were oversized Grey Goose vodka bottles. I didn't even know liquor bottles were made that big, maybe only in France. This is where I met the male stripper, Mathieu (or it could be "Matthieu." There really isn't an emphasis on name spelling when mingling over wine and, after all, people never spelled my name right. I have been called "Christy," "Christina," and even "Christian." One time I was paying for my food at Taco John's when the cashier handed me back my card and asked, "so how is the new Batman movie, Christian Bale?" I assume he was joking but he did have a rather serious face).

It was obvious that Mathieu stood out from the rest of the friends. Unlike his male counterparts who were dressed casually in jeans, t-shirts and tennis shoes, Mathieu looked like a guy who just stepped off the runway for Calvin Klein men's wear. He donned a light blue with navy stripes Oxford shirt, a navy suit jacket, yellowish tan dress pants, and dress shoes similar to Sperrys. He was dressed for a yacht party, not an intimate gathering with friends who were sitting on the floor around a coffee table smoking hookah and sipping *vin blanc*.

As the night went on, more laughs were had and more wine was drunk and everything Mathieu said was more and more interesting. After about his third glass of wine and fifth cigarette, he started divulging to Ryan and me his romantic tips. He was a stripper after all, or at least that is what he said he did for a living. The conversation got its start mainly because I was trying to get some advice for Ryan, one of the students I became friends with. Ryan was crushing on another girl in our program. Unfortunately he was not doing a good job getting this girl's attention. So we sought out some advice from Mathieu. His blue eyes lit up immediately at the chance to share his knowledge on one of the most discussed subjects in the world—romance, or at least his version of it.

A lot people picture the French as the creators of romance in a sense. Almost any girl would swoon to be proposed to under the lights of the Eiffel Tower, and everyone knows the French kiss. But Mathieu spoke on the subject like he had been studying it for years. He seemed more like an escort than a stripper. His knowledge on how to win over a woman was extensive and seemed conclusive. I am convinced he is a direct descendant of Fabio, the lord and savior of all that is cliché romance.

The first step, he told Ryan, was to change his wardrobe up. "Look at you," he said. "You are like how do you say, uh, where is Waldo, you know? This shirt [red and white striped, fairly

unattractive] is no good. You should not wear red. Blue is a much better color. *Comme ça*" pointing at his sports jacket. He also mentioned that guys should never wear black shoes. And I admit after thinking about it, I had noticed that most of the European men I had seen wore brown dress shoes. He was right.

The next helpful hint he gave was explaining his ways of approaching girls he spies in the street, café, or any other public place. He instantly slouched his back and warned in his heavily accented English "don't ever stand like this. It is not attractive. It is lazy." Ryan and I attentively straightened our posture as the master instructed. I was beginning to think this guy was a descendant of the royal family due to his stressed importance on etiquette and dress, or maybe we in the United States have stopped placing importance on such values. It is not odd, at least in East Tennessee, to see people gracing the aisles of Walmart in their pajamas.

Mathieu also proceeded to inform us of a proper gentleman's walk. Once again the image of a male model came to mind. His walk was quite fluid. He almost floated across Antoine's floor, as if he was walking down Cours Sextius en route to one of the many cafés for tapas. It was quite sensual as he almost strutted through the apartment. All the while he was repeatedly running his hand through his just short of shoulder length blond hair. There is something slightly feminine about Mathieu. His hair, which was probably held together by some type of brand name hair glue hours before, was now falling across his forehead requiring to be brushed back with a sweep of the hand. His lips are poutier than most men's but he still has the hard lines of the jaw and nose that prevent him from appearing too feminine. He is not one of those guys who would be described as brawny. In fact, I would even say he is *pretty*, definitely the male-model type.

For such a fashion and self-conscious man. There was one thing that did surprise me about Mathieu—he was not wearing any cologne. It seems like in France most of the men are in



some way odorous. Not to say that it is a terrible body odor smell but just different; there is more of a hint of sweat, a natural scent. It is like most of the French guys were blessed/cursed with overactive pheromone glands. Some guys, though, would conceal the smell by wearing Burberry cologne or Chanel Bleu which Antoine described as “orgasmic.” Mathieu rolled his eyes at his shallow friend’s comment. The smell of the latter is quite nice but if it was as strong as Antoine mentioned, I think it would be too powerful to bottle. Maybe Mathieu felt it wasn't necessary as part of his overall game plan to douse himself in cologne. He didn’t mention what kind of cologne he wore. Apparently he had other tricks up his sleeve.

After our lesson on how men get women, Mathieu desperately needed to get more cigarettes. It was almost four a.m. at that point, and Aix does not have a twenty-four convenience store. In fact, cigarettes have to be bought at a specific store, just for tobacco and cigars, and most of *les tabacs* closed around ten if not earlier. I knew he would not be able to find any cigarettes, but Ryan and I decided to go along with him anyways.

So we followed him around the deserted streets of Aix. Mathieu was just fascinating. He had such an optimistic outlook about life. I was not remotely at all attracted to him, but he was an interesting person to be around. Like I suspected, every shop was closed. You could smell the bread baking already, but no cigarettes for Mathieu. Eventually, he came across a homeless guy on the street and traded him ten euros for a pack of smokes. Cigarettes are costly in France, about five or six euro, still the homeless man got a deal.

We made our way back to Antoine’s apartment sleepily wandering through the streets. I was ready to go home to bed, but when we got back there were new girls sitting in the living room. Antoine and his two other friends had dressed up in the monster masks and jedi costumes and gone out looking to bring back more people to hang out. Apparently, it was about this time

that all the discotheques in Aix began to close their doors for the night, including the most popular club, Le Mistral, which is where these girls had come from before Antoine intercepted them on his way home. It was like the party was starting all over again. Mathieu bragged to us, “You see, Antoine goes out and finds girls who are already drunk because he has no game. This is no problem for me. Watch.” Ryan and I sat back and watched how Mathieu interacted with these new girls. He was clearly laying down his charm, and taking all the attention away from Antoine and his friends. But his talk wasn’t enough, he needed some action too.

He picked a song on Antoine’s iPod sitting in the corner that I had never heard before and started dancing. He slowly swirled his hips as he unbuttoned his shirt. The girls were laughing and clapping all the while. Mathieu didn’t stop until he was down to his underwear. Thank god that was as far as it went. Ryan and I looked at each other and knew it was time to leave.

Ryan walked me home even though my house was in the complete opposite direction of his place, almost 30 minutes. I kind of felt lied to and slightly betrayed. I had just spent the past few hours listening to Mathieu’s tips to getting the ladies. He actually made it seem like a skill without at all being trashy or coming off as a man whore. He seemed to have so much class, yet he didn’t even try using any of his moves before he resorted to strip dancing just to get the attention from those girls. I thought he just stripped for money, but apparently I was wrong. He also used that skill to interact with the females.

I kept rationalizing in my head why Mathieu had to break down and strip. Maybe he was just drunk, but I think that was just part of who he was. He was comfortable with himself and his sexuality. If he wanted to strip for an audience with cash in their pockets or for a bunch of girls sitting in an apartment, he was going to do it.

I began thinking Ryan should probably just keep being himself around girls and forget Mathieu's guidelines. I came to realize that Mathieu's lessons were not necessarily about how to get girls, but rather how Mathieu would go about getting girls. Ryan didn't need to act like the love guru. He just needed to be himself and be comfortable with that. Mathieu's comfortability translated into confidence, and confidence is overall what attracts people.

Maybe this is why I never really dated and no one assumed I would. I know for a fact I was not confident or even comfortable with myself in high school. I don't even know why I started dating my first boyfriend, Jordon, in the first place. He mentioned one time that the reason he was attracted to me was because I actually seemed determined to do something with my life, which he thought would also rub off on him. So basically he wanted to date me because he thought I would be a positive influence. Great. That is a real endearing quality, I guess.

Four years is a long time for a relationship. I know people who are married already and haven't been together that long. I have never dated anyone else and I began to wonder if that was a good or bad thing. What if I was only dating Jordon because we were comfortable with each other? How could a relationship last if one person in the relationship doesn't even know who she is really? For the longest time, I felt like I only stayed in the relationship because I worried no one else would want me.

After the night with Mathieu, I was determined to be more accepting of myself, knowing if I could do that, it would translate to confidence. Surely to God if this guy could strip in front of a group of strangers then I could be a little more outgoing. I was going to try to stop worrying so much about the importance of dating someone and worry more about making myself happy. The next morning, I left for school with my shoulders back and head up, walking with confidence, just like Mathieu had instructed. This was a good start.

## VII

### Fête de la Musique: Partying with Other Expatriates

2:37 a.m. Saturday Morning – I was exhausted by his point. My feet had small cuts from all the broken glass, my legs were sore from all the dancing and walking, my arm was bruised from all the shoving, and my ears rung from all music. This was Fête de la Musique.

I have never been to a music festival and never had the desire to go to one either. Sitting around for two to three days staying up all night, not showering, and listening to music is just not how I would like to spend part of my summer vacation. Even if festivals have become a widespread trend across the U.S. in the past couple of years, it is one trend I have avoided, despite the growing popularity. The closest event to a festival that I have been to was this summer in Aix en Provence.

June 21 is the worldwide celebrated World Music day. It was started in 1982 in France, but many countries all across the globe honor it as well. This year on Friday the 21<sup>st</sup>, the small town of Aix was transformed for fête de la musique. Streets were shut down, stages were placed at the end of avenues or set in the many places which dotted the town of Aix. Our teachers at IAU and most of our house moms warned us to be careful, that the event was really more of a huge citywide party. I asked my house mom if she was going, but she laughingly replied, “No. this is not for me. I do not like large crowds of people and really all it is is an excuse for people to get drunk.” I didn’t expect it to be all that dramatic.

5:15- I had made plans with a couple of other students to meet in front of school so that we could all go together to Cameron and Josh’s apartment to hang out and have some wine before heading

out for la Fête. We had learned by now that it was much cheaper to split a bottle of wine than going out and buying drinks. Most of the students, even myself, stayed in homes with a French family; however, Josh and Cameron, through their study abroad program got placed in a rented apartment. No adults. It quickly became the typical hang out spot, especially since it was right around the corner from our school.

5:26- I was waiting for Vanessa and Jamie so we could head to the apartment, but they still hadn't showed up. The WooHoo, the touristy hang out for international students, was right down the block and it was their favorite hangout, so I decided to drop in and see if they were there. Sure enough, they were chatting with Sebastian the bartender who had been telling us stories and entertaining us for the past three weeks since our arrival. Jordan, a New Zealand native who relocated here when his parents moved for a job, was also sitting with them. Jordan loved to talk, to anyone, about anything. It was all I could do to get them out of the bar to head to the apartment.

Most of the locals said the events started around six p.m. That seemed a little early to me. Out of all the concerts I could remember going to, I was sure that things didn't start getting good until around at least nine. But we were on France's terms, so six it was.

5:53- We finally made it to Cameran and Josh's apartment. By the looks of it, everyone had the same idea we did. There about 30 people there, most of them students from IAU, but Mike had brought along Antoine and his friends minus Matthieu (Katie and I had already met Antoine and his posse, needless to say I avoided their corner of the room like Marie Antoinette tried her damndest to stay away from the guillotine). I was glad we brought Jordan along. He was local

so he had been to la Fête. Plus, the minute you brought a foreign kid to hang out immediately stepped up your social status. Jordan was from New Zealand, hello status ratings at an all-time high. It sounds pretty conceited, but that is one of the reasons we all wanted to travel abroad—to meet people who grew up somewhere completely different and who could tell you about places that you would probably never be able to visit—and people were completely taken by him.

It was like the party scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. People were constantly coming in and out, which becomes quite the annoying hassle when you have to constantly page people in on the



Thursday, 13 June 2013: Mikey telling one of his infamous stories at the apartment

buzzer. And along with the inflow of people came an endless supply of wine. There was always an open bottle and if there wasn't for some reason, the market was only three buildings down. Plus the atmosphere was all talk of who you've met thus far and what kind of weekend trips you were planning on taking. Mikey, a 28 year old wine enthusiast from Washington, told a joke that kept building and building. It must have taken at least

30 minutes to finally get to the end, but it was

hilarious. Jordan was almost on the floor he was laughing so hard. We were having a great time.

7:30- From the balcony in the apartment we could judge just how busy the festival was getting by the increase of the amount of people in the streets. Jordan had been to la Fête before so he assured us we wouldn't be missing anything spectacular this early. Still I was ready to hit the

streets. I wanted to be out celebrating the World Day of Music, but we didn't leave the apartment until almost sundown when the air was losing its touch of warmth.

9:15- Jordan was right. About two hours later is when the chaos ensued and I truly understood all the warnings about la Fête. The streets were at full capacity, along with every restaurant or café within an earshot of music.

We headed towards Cours Mirabeau (the main street in town), figuring that the largest stage would be there. By

the time we arrived, we managed to dwindle our group down from a solid thirty people to about fifteen. After just standing in the crowds on Cours Mirabeau we lost three more people in five minutes. It was like the crowds were just swallowing us whole. I really enjoyed the music that was playing though. It was kind of a folk rock which was super popular at the time with the rise of Mumford and Sons.

Midnight- By this time you could just hear the symphony of bottles crashing to the ground every second. And that's one thing about the French, they don't drink beer from a can. The ground was covered with green and clear colored shards of glass. If there is one thing I learned about the fête,



Friday, 21 June 2013: The main stage on Cours Mirabeau



Friday, 21 June 2013: A view of Place Richelme from the apartment window

it is to wear close-toed shoes. I didn't sustain too many injuries, just a gash on my big toe, but it could've had the potential to be much worse. The rest of the group we were left with decided to try

another area of music since the folk band we were listening to had finished their set. Jamie and Vanessa suggested the stage right outside of our favorite hangout, the WooHoo.

After eight minutes we had managed to move only a measly thirty feet, but we did lose another half of our group. We were down to six. We spent fifteen minutes looking for the other six or so who got separated but decided the best thing was to keep on marching. Normally I wouldn't leave a soldier behind, but this was the most crowded area in Aix and the rest of us wanted some air. The consensus among the rest of us was to stick to the plan and head to the WooHoo; this hangout spot was always the go-to place and I was sure everyone, separated or not, would end up making their way there.

I decided to lead the way since I knew the streets of Aix the best. Every day I had to walk through Cours Mirabeau to get to school, and the Woohoo was just at the end of the same street that our school was on, Rue Bon Pasteur. However, I made one fatal miscalculation: we had had to go through Rue Verriere. Bar Street is a better name for it. The whole street is lined with pubs and bars and—tonight especially—lined with drunk French people. We all linked arms and tried to push our way through the crowds. It looked like a scene from a crowded Wal-Mart on Black Friday with all the pushing and shoving. It took us thirty minutes to push our way through the masses. Normally it only takes me about three minutes to walk the whole length of Rue Verriere, but all six of us made it through together which was a relief.



1:07- We finally made it to the WooHoo.

American pop and rap music—about 6 years behind—was all that played, but we had a good time. People gathered in a circle as breakout

dancers took hold of everyone’s attention. One guy was even doing head spins and backflips. It was

quite the performance. Eventually even most of our friends started showing up in small groups.

By the end of the night we ended up back with almost half of our group. We celebrated la Fête for the next couple of hours until three a.m. when bands started packing up.



Saturday, 18 June 2013: Our favorite hangout The Woohoo

I never imagined I would be shoving my way thorough crowds of people just to hang out in the streets and listen to music, but it was one of most exciting things I have ever done. The city was transformed. Normally the streets were all quiet by 11 p.m., but on this night I spied mothers still pushing their children around in strollers. It was a side of the French I probably would have never seen if it wasn’t for la Fête. It was better than the Festival of Nations at Dollywood. We drank with the French, got lost with the French, and listened to music all night long with the French. I think some of us even started to believe we were French.

## VIII

### Don't Make Me Go: I Would Probably be Detained if I

#### Threw a Temper Tantrum in the Airport, Right?

I hated leaving France and all the new friends I made. Sure it was probably just the summertime sadness kicking in, but honestly I didn't really miss home. I had never really been homesick that I could recall. I arrived at the airport three hours before my flight was to take off at 6 am. This was the earliest I had been up the entire time I was in France, well except the weekend I spent in Rognes. Jamie a girl from IAU and I, along with some people we had met, stayed up until eight in the morning just sitting by the pool watching the sunrise over the hills of Provence, but that doesn't really count since we never went to sleep.

I found out quickly that there was hardly a person at the airport. One of the maybe five airport employees working told me that it is not necessary to arrive ahead of time for international flights like it is in the United States. I remained seated in a stiff plastic seat for about two hours before I could even check in and go to my gate. I tried to wiggle around and get in a comfortable position to take a nap. But the chair won that battle. Like the airport, I felt empty. Maybe it was just the exhaustion and lack of sleep, but I think it was because I was leaving a place I had grown so fond of. I truly grew to accept Aix as my second home. I knew my way around town and my French was getting better every day.

The airport in Nice is relatively small. Most of the passengers appeared wealthy, probably heading home from vacationing in Cannes or one of the other towns hidden along the rocky coast of *Le Cote d'Azur*. There were no shops or breakfast stands open until about an hour before the first flight, my flight, was set to depart. We all quietly waited until it was time to board the plane. Sleep was heavy on my mind. As we sat on the tarmac preparing for departure, I looked out at the icy blue Mediterranean water that still seemed to glimmer even though the sun

was in the process of waking itself up. It seemed like it took forever for it to finally find its place in the sky. It only prolonged the angst I felt about leaving.

I remember being absolutely terrified when I first landed in Nice. The landing/departing strip is directly beside the ocean. One miscalculation and your plane could be going down in the water. It is

like one of those airports they show on a History Channel special about the most bizarre airports around the world. One of my favorite things I did while in Nice was sitting on the public beach, caressing the small pebbles, and just watching the planes take off and land. There was no way to know who was coming and going on those planes, but I knew that it wasn't my time to leave yet, and that was all that mattered.

My trip to France was by no means glorious. I grew up in a world where Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen traveled and had an adventure every time. But, sadly, I did not get to go shopping with an ultra-chic supermodel, nor did I hop on the back of some French guy's moped to get a private tour of Aix en Provence. Spoiled was I, growing up with fantasies that people traveled abroad and found romance or decided to never return home. If only. The only thing I found was my way onto a four story yacht with Katie. We mingled for a couple of hours while champagne was served to us in crystal glasses by the bartender who promptly appeared as soon as we set foot on the yacht. That was as close as I got to the Hollywood-projected travel fantasies that so many people yearn for. But I still love traveling.



Sunday, 30 June 2013: A plane in the distance viewed from the public beach in Nice, France

So why does anyone *love* anything? How does a person know? I feel like most human beings are on an everlasting search to find something to *love*. It is such a deep word with many connotations. We throw it around like it means nothing at all anymore. If there is one thing I am certain about, with my whole entity, it is that I love traveling abroad.

I have been traveling ever since I was in eighth grade. I went to Italy and got lost in the rain-drenched streets of Venice. I have climbed the Mayan ruins deep in the jungle of Central Mexico. And, I have been to Paris, the mecca to many travelers. Traveling is a great privilege that many people do not always have the chance to take advantage of, which adds to the deep connection I have with it.

I didn't realize that going abroad was such a passion of mine until I was sitting at dinner with my boyfriend Jordon. It was two weeks prior to my month long trip to Aix en Provence, France. I was overwhelmed with excitement; he was not. He was quite antsy, and I could see why. We had been dating for almost four years, since I was a senior in high school and he was a freshman in college. The most time we had spent apart was no more than a week or so, and now I was jet setting off to France for a whole month. Yay me!

Jordon has never been out of the country. He has been to Hawaii once. He doesn't count it as travelling abroad, but I do. Going to any foreign place that can put you out of your element counts in my book. He does not see the benefit in traveling and made that point very clear to me as we ate. He kept asking my questions like, "How is this going to benefit you in the long haul? Is this even going to be educational? Is it going to make you a better person?" and on and on.

It is hard to answer these questions, especially when you are explaining to someone who does not consider himself as someone who has been abroad and experienced a new culture. I looked at him and all I could say was, "Traveling is my dream, and you know this. I am making

my dream come true, but right now you are making me feel like my dream is stupid!” I was so deeply hurt. This is how I knew I was in *love* with my pastime of traveling. I couldn’t put into words all the things he expected. How was I supposed to know how this trip was going to benefit me? I am no crystal ball.

Traveling is my hobby, my pastime, my passion. Jordon tells me all the time, “Let’s just wait and travel when we are older. I want to travel when I have money so I can ball out [spend loads of money] and do whatever I want.” I am sure a lot of people think this way. You know, wait and travel when you are more financially stable. It is a very securing thought, but what he does not understand is that that is exactly what everyone says not to do! I have read travel blog after travel blog, most recently Jeff Goins’ blog “3 Reasons to Travel While You’re Young.” He echoes the thoughts of many other writers mentioning ideas like “Adventure: why you should not wait,” and I agree.

I don’t want to be sixty-five hiking my saggy old ass across the Great Wall of China. There is a reason you do some things while you are young. I could care less if I have lots of money to make traveling more comfortable when I am older. Traveling broke is part of the great experience. You stay in a hostel for the night, but instead of worrying if the Irish girl in the bed next to you is going to go all psycho in the middle of the night and kill you, you strike up a conversation with her and go out to eat at a café so neither of you are alone. I mean look at Jesse’s character from *Before Midnight*. He took a chance and talked to a stranger on a train and look how that ended up: 2 follow up films!

Traveling is something you cannot explain to someone. It is simply something you have to experience for yourself. I love going from town to town, seeing the different architecture carved into the buildings, and tasting the local café’s specialty. It beats going to McDonalds

every other day of the week. And sure I love my memory foam pillow that I can hardly sleep without while I'm home, but when I am abroad, I am just content knowing that some person probably slept on my pillow the night before and someone is going to sleep on it the next night. It is like a transferring of one traveler's thoughts and emotions to another and we are all searching for the next adventure in our travels.

I admit, though, traveling does have a way of letting you down every now and then. If you think you are going to go abroad and everything is going to be perfect, you are sadly mistaken. Katie and I decided to spend the weekend in Nice before my departure. We stayed Thursday night in Nice then headed to nearby Monaco to spend the night on Friday. This was probably the most terrible decision we could have made. Katie was already coming down with a sinus infection, so she was grouchy the entire time. I had to haul ALL of my luggage (a backpack, tote bag, and a packed-full suitcase) around with me since I was returning to the States on Monday. It was only after we had departed our train and walked around the train station for about thirty minutes when we realized I had left my backpack on the train. It was almost comical. I suddenly felt like I was missing something and my back felt a lot lighter. I whipped my head around and looked Katie me in the eye. She instantly asked, "Where is your backpack?"

We went to the train office to see if they could have an attendant look for it on the train, but our best option was to wait another hour until the train rolled back through the station in return to Nice and see if it was still on the train. It wasn't. Luckily my Marc Jacobs backpack was only filled with bath products, chargers, the summer issue of *Creative Nonfiction*, and my copy of Sloane Crosley's *How Did You Get This Number*; everything else of importance like my iPad and passport were in the tote bag still hanging on my arm.

I spent an entire month in France, and losing my backpack is the only disappointing memory I have. Even though you are out of your element when you travel, you can't let the little things—like the boulangerie two blocks from school selling out of your favorite pastry before you make it in for breakfast—bring you down. Just try another because I guarantee that any puff pastry you decide to try and shove down your mouth will be just as delicious as the *pain au chocolat* that you originally wanted.

What I enjoy most about traveling is that you are always learning new things about yourself. For instance I realized I am not as bad at directions as I thought. By my fourth day in Aix, I knew my way around town. I could read the map and know exactly where to go. It may have been my keen sense of direction, but I doubt it. I still have to use a GPS pretty much anywhere I go in Johnson City, and I have lived there for over a year now. But it did not start out that way. On Sunday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, we were meeting at school for orientation. Caroline's daughter was going to drop me off so I didn't have to walk there. But I did have to walk all the way back home. I was so scared I was going to get lost on the 20 minute trek from school to the apartment that I Google mapped the directions to and from school and wrote them down step by step. It worked and I found my way home easily. By Tuesday I didn't have to pull my sheet of paper with the jotted down directions out because I knew the route by heart.

I quickly became Katie's savior in Aix. She was ALWAYS getting lost. Our first weekend in Aix Katie, Grace, and I decided to meet at the statue by school at 8:00 on Friday to grab dinner. Grace and I waited and waited for Katie. Finally she called and said she was lost at the Pizza Capri. So we went and rescued her. The next Tuesday morning I received a text from Katie: "I give up on life." She was lost again, at the Pizza Capri, and late for class. I literally had to text her back step by step directions to school. The funny thing is, Katie was always

questioning Grace or my sense of direction when we were going somewhere, but after these two incidents, we revoked that privilege.

I admit though she was bad at directions, she did help out at times in getting us to our destination. Any time we wanted to go somewhere but didn't know the exact location, Katie would take my map, walk up to a French person, and kindly ask for them to point on the map where something was. It was then my job to find the route on the map and get us to the destination. Katie has to be the most charismatic person I have ever met. She never came off as rude, and people were always willing to help her.

I sat in that dreary airport recalling all the adventures I had with Grace and Katie. They still had another two weeks left in France, whereas I was on my way out of the country. I wasn't really ready to leave. I hadn't prepared myself yet. I already knew that by the time I set foot in the United States I was going to be depressed. Normally, I don't use myself and depression in the same sentence. Depression is a serious disease and I wouldn't dare claim it because I know people who suffer greatly at the hand of depression. But every time I come back from a trip abroad, I am depressed for about three weeks. Maybe it is because I miss the adventure and culture or maybe it is because I am forced to go back to—what I would consider—my mundane life.

If I had to pick one thing, and only one, to say I missed the most, it would be the French food. It didn't take long to figure out why the French are so passionate about their history of gastronomy. Food is incredibly important in their culture. Bakers wake up between three and four in the morning to begin the baking process. There is nothing better to wake up to in the morning than the scent of fresh bread sitting in the windows of bakeries, and bakeries in France are like Starbucks in the states: one on every corner. Occasionally now and then when I'm home



driving around town I'll get a whiff of something cooking in the air. Most of the time though, it is just the odor of cooking oil from the nearest fast food joint, which is not at all appetizing.

I found it amazing that even the airplane food was better leaving France than the food on the plane leaving America. Usually I opt for the vegetarian meal because I am a little too skeptical about processed meat. I ate the chicken and rice one time on a flight to Switzerland, and it tormented my stomach for the next two days. Needless to say, I was ecstatic that for our meal we were served a cold pasta and vegetable dish in a vinaigrette sauce. It was still better than pretty much any pasta dish I had eaten back home. My props to US Airways.

My flights were relatively smooth this time. No delays or malfunctions. By the time I landed back in East Tennessee, the sun was out and the humidity was high. This was home, just as it always has been. But it was nice to breath in a little of the Appalachian air. The mountains are green with life compared to the dry, rocky mountains in the French Riviera that so many artists like Cezanne and van Gogh captured in their portraits. Tennessee is a different type of beauty, that's all. Instead of parks hiding in-between streets just waiting to be discovered by the wandering traveler, we have roaming knolls and hiking trails. It is in both places a very laid back kind of life.

Jordon picked me up at the airport. Of course he asked the typical questions like "How was your trip?" I didn't even know how to begin. I was quiet for a long time. How could I recount every detail and spit them back out for him, especially when I knew he wouldn't appreciate all the details anyways. It was dinner time and Jordon looked over at me on the way home and asked, "Do you want Taco Bell?" If there was one thing I wanted the whole time in Aix, it was a Baja Blast from Taco Bell.

While I was in France, I was trying to convince myself that I was becoming more French by the day, but I wasn't really. I was still Christin from East Tennessee. Tennessee is my home but Aix will always be my second home. And I'm okay with that.

## Recommended Reading

These books and people were extremely helpful in my writing process. My words and thoughts would not have been written the same without these influences.

-*I Was Told There'd Be Cake* by Sloane Crosley (2008). I read this book for an assignment for a Literary Nonfiction class I took and fell in love with her writing. I even read and bought her second book *How Did You Get This Number* (2010). If David Sedaris and Chelsea Handler had a love child, it would be Sloane. She is witty and blunt and everything I love in a writer. Her essays are so relatable to everyone. She makes it seem like we both live the same life just in a different zip code and time period.

-*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott (1995). I don't know if I would actually enjoy her other books—probably too spiritual for my taste—but this book was absolutely amazing. Her essay “Shitty First Drafts” changed my life forever. I used to be so self-conscious about my writing, but this essay taught me that it is okay to write a terrible first draft because you will clean it up, sharpen the edges and come out with something usable.

-Sarah Vowell is one author I will keep reading and reading over and over again. I mean who else could take an obsession with assassination and turn it into an entire book? *Assassination Vacation* (2006) still remains one of my favorite nonfiction books. It literally blew my mind—but not in the Lincoln sense.

-*Creative Nonfiction* is the one and only magazine I actually am willing to subscribe to. In the 50<sup>th</sup> issue, Lee Gutkind, the founder of the magazine, discusses literary nonfiction and its place in the creative and academic world. He shares his desires to integrate creative nonfiction as a necessity

in the writing world. Based on his testimonials, I can truly appreciate the craft of “True stories, well told.

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