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Memories Made & Remembered

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Outside Buckingham Palace, in early January, Tim and I stood in the waning, gray skied light of English winter. My high-top black Converse were soaked, torn, faded, well-worn after so many miles spent covering Europe on foot. The snow fell down around us, light but steady, the millions of flakes slowly melting into the pavement. The Union Jack flew over the palace, and somewhere inside Queen Elizabeth II passed her evening quietly. In the wind we struggled to unfold our tattered map of London, trying to orient ourselves and plot the best route to Russell Square. Tim, who had lost his gloves and decided he was too stubborn to buy new ones (we had just two weeks before we flew home), buried his fists into the pouch of his sweatshirt and shivered as the snow silently drifted down from the foreboding sky. We walked through a desolate Green Park, the tree tops sprinkled with delicate snow like powdered sugar. All the tourists, it seemed, were somewhere else, warm and jovial in the dim lights of the dark and cozy pubs of London, sipping on their rich, dark, cellar-cool ale.

We walked through the cold, past the lights of the Ritz Hotel, trying to look inside at all the smiling stately faces, the richest of the rich enjoying the splendor their wealth could afford them. We were cold and had a few hours to kill before meeting Brian and Ben at Russell Square. We spotted a Café Nero across the street and decided to enjoy an overpriced cup of milky tea, warm up, and use the loo (which the café, to our befuddlement, did not have public access to). Sitting at the counter looking out at London in the snow flurries, we let our cold bodies thaw as we settled down to our cups of tea; two sugars for me, one for Tim. The map was unfolded once more, this time without the hassle of the wind, spread out over the counter, the River Thames snaking its way from my cup of tea to Tim's. We'd spent several weekends in London, yet the city still seemed so foreign: The millions of faces captured in the mind with a hazy pallor and intense color, like Polaroid snapshots; mingling in the air, the dozens of languages passed in the street; on the Tube, avoiding eye contact with strangers but aware of their presence. All of it a part of the mystique of this ancient, sprawling metropolis.

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This memory, like so many others, captured forever, experienced, but quickly fading and eventually forgotten or replaced by the newness of the future. But for now, the memory imprinted and seemingly eternal, like the shadows of the Coliseum, like Lord Nelson's Column towering over Trafalgar Square. Memories remembered and real like a cigarette enjoyed on the embankment of the Thames as the sun set over Parliament Square and the lights of Big Ben illuminated the ever-present Time, forever ticking slowly into the future. The eternal march of progress that is Europe. The heart of western culture. The roots of my existence, but, in reality, all that I saw, knew, and loved a brief candle that all moments of perception are destined and doomed to become. Discarded and anonymous like so many million cigarette butts scattered on wet pavement.

Like a dream, those four months of my life. The thousands of pounds and euros spent, the time passed on the calendar, make it real. The innumerable memories, the friends made, the languages butchered, the mass transit systems managed, the monuments, the market squares, the winding rivers and alleyways of Europe, so surreal. Merely imaginable to the inexperienced, but relatable to all those who have shared in the wonder and mystery of Europe, with all her castles and cathedrals, butchers and bakers and fishmongers, the roundabouts, the foreign sweet shops, the cobbled roads, the eternal fear of pickpockets.

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To think now of the otherworldly New Year's celebration in Amsterdam. The magical fireworks show in Damrak Square put on by the citizens and tourists of Amsterdam. The fireworks thrown through the crowds, firecracker explosions peppered throughout the city like the sounds of a war zone, the men and women climbing the lampposts in pure ecstasy, the hundreds of geese honking and ringing in the new year in the picturesque canals. The neon. The gyros. The cones of fries doused in mayonnaise. The amazing memories I made while abroad. The experience I was so fortunate to be a part of.

Oh, to recall Paris in the winter bleak. The madness of twelve boulevards converging into one massive roundabout at the Arc de Triomphe. Baguettes carried under the arms of well-dressed Parisians. The Rue Cler lined with shops for the shopper in no hurry. The competing patisseries, wine shops, butchers (for duck, for lamb, for fish), the aroma of aging cheeses wafting through the quaint streets. A quiche enjoyed as I walked in the shadow of history, of Napoleon, of the Eiffel Tower. The insufferable Frenchness of the French, understandable as they grapple with so many Americans butchering their language, hoards of overweight tourists, with flags on their shirts and guidebooks in their hands, and loud, oh so loud. The harsh American twang of the same vowels pronounced so elegantly across

the Atlantic. To think of those words pronounced in the smooth, lulling French language: Champs-Elysees, Jules Joffrin, Montmartre.

It's the quiet energy possibility and the bustle and noise of Europe I miss most now. The blank faces on the Underground. The hushed conversations. The blues musicians on the Metro in Paris. The wrinkled woman asking for a trifling bit of change, bowing her head in humility after the Pope's blessing in St. Peter's Square. The beautiful, rolling, green countryside, dotted with sheep and small villages, beautiful and perfect like something out of a novel. And, of course, the full English breakfast, with all its delicious fats and carbohydrates, the big brother of the sparse Continental breakfast of backpackers' hostels, a cold croissant with Nutella, a coffee, maybe some fruit if you are lucky.

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All those memories made, I'll try not to forget them. I've captured them in writing, in conversation, in photographs. But the remembering seems trivial to the experience itself. I was there. Admiring £30,000 watches in Harrods, signing unsuspecting friends up for the York Castle Museum mailing list, drinking a pint of Guinness with Tim while looking over the city of Dublin, the River Liffey running through it on its way to Dublin Bay, flowing out toward the English Channel, toward infinity. For now, I am content to remember, but the itch of travel remains. I want to see the world now, more than ever. I always imagined the world as a faraway, unattainable place, but it is so close. At our fingertips. And when you see the world, you care about it. It means something, because you have become a part of it and shared in its magic, if only for a brief instant, a flash of time in history's great span. But you made the memories. You were there. You listened to the music of the world. You participated in the march of progress. You left home and returned, matured, independent, world-weary, but excited for that very same world which at times exhausted you, at times infuriated you, but overall, the world out there that made life more exciting and wonderful and beautiful than you ever could have imagined.