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2016-17 Postcards

Postcards from Abroad

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2017

## Everything Ends

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## Everything Ends

Most people come home after their semester abroad raving about how it was the greatest semester and experience, how they loved the travel, the studying, the opportunity they were given. They tell you about the lifelong friends they made and how the world is now their oyster and they can travel anywhere, see a friendly face and have a bed to sleep in.

You hear this and somehow you expect every day to be perfect and these friendships to be formed immediately. You think you're ready for 5 months of living with perfect strangers, dealing with language barriers, figuring out a time to call home that works because of the time difference, eating the same meal for 3 weeks straight because cooking eggs is easy and when you share a kitchen with 20 people, there's not always room to get fancy.

You do not think about how your friends and family will text you at 3AM making sure you were not in Brussels or Nice or Munich for the latest terrorist attack. Sure, you know you are going to be in a different country with different expectations, but going to school should be the same...right? But then you find yourself being one of four students in class each week: the two doing their presentation and the other international student, you are both there to get your scholarship paper signed for attendance and you do not know how the system works. You do not realize that immediately following introductions, upon hearing that you are from the United States, you will be asked your political stance and who you are voting for.

After living with family, friends, pets and roommates for 20 years, nothing prepares you for the cold brick building that contains your single room that you are shown to on a rainy day. You step off the plane arriving in your new country and the thrill and anticipation is climaxing, a year of expectations can finally materialize. You do not realize, though, that on your train ride to your new home you will be fighting back tears so that the girl you are embarking on this journey with does not think you are weak. Your train is not passing the beautiful rolling hills, skyscrapers and little German cottages that Pinterest and Google prepared you for; you are seeing the tracks, the graffiti-covered buildings, the construction zones and seeing the mid-day drunks who board the train with beer in their hands, laughing with their friends. You are facing a different reality.

Suddenly you're surrounded by students from all around the world, tens of languages, every religion and they all know about the United States, but unfortunately, you have to sneak a look at your phone and check Google maps to see where their country that doesn't sound familiar is located. You learn quickly that things you thought were common knowledge actually differ from background to background - how many continents are there, really?

Fifteen days into your life abroad you find yourself sitting in the kitchen planning a trip to another country with 10 people whose names you are still trying to remember. That first trip helps you form the closest bonds, though. Quickly a month has passed. The people who were strangers baked you a cake on your birthday two days after meeting you; they greet you in the halls and around town and you find yourself looking at familiar faces when going to Mensa. Somedays, something is not clicking, though. You are three months in and you are still having the same conversation with your friends from home - you wish you were back at your home university, sharing the late night studying in the library, and at the concert that all your friends went to, but they tag you in the picture anyways, they have not forgotten you.

Getting out of bed some days is the hardest thing imaginable because you do not want to be in this foreign land. Then there are amazing days where you are sitting by the river after class, sharing stories with the people who you cannot believe your days are suddenly numbered with. Or you find yourself dancing in the kitchen to French folk music with the boy who has you convinced that he counts his pasta, or laugh crying in Athens sitting with seven people who mean the world to you now, talking until 4am- all things that you thought you would only find with your friends at home.

Nevertheless, your new friends, they also know you now. Your Korean friends that you took a blind booking trip with gave you the Korean name Sooyoung because you are four years younger than them...but age is just a number now. They also give you a Chinese name, just as they have, that means 'Forever Smiles'; this means the world to you because even though you had your most depressing days, they know you for the happiness.

Suddenly the countdown you have until you see your sister and your dog and your best friend is a sad reminder of the limited days left. You learned to appreciate the late nights spent in the dungeon. Or ping-pong room... sitting on the deck cramming for finals until 1AM with the girl who you butted heads with in the beginning, but eventually you both realized you were just looking for friends and sometimes emotions are expressed differently.

Through traveling and studying with people from different backgrounds you realize that it isn't about the quantity of trips you take or the friends you have, but the quality and the safety you take into what goes into your life. You learn along the way that everything is about perspective. When you are in a foreign country and you see your friend lose her passport and all her information, but she stays optimistic, it reminds you that remaining calm and collected gets more done than panicking ever will. It may take you the entire journey to realize that somewhere along the line, this did become the best experience of your life. You realize when you're sitting on top of a mountain in Scotland, after not seeing any of your new friends for 10 days, you'll never all be together again and they are the people you want to return to at that point when loneliness strikes. You have already said some goodbyes and they were hard, but for some people you think back to the moment you met, when he went to kiss your cheeks as a greeting. Unsure of this kind of hello, you pushed him away, just to find yourself at the end of the journey wishing you had one more chance to bring him into a hug.

During those five months, you integrate into a community, volunteer alongside a refugee from Somalia, with whom you can only communicate by the small amount of German you both know. You find someone who shares the same love of a sport that is not soccer - also being reprimanded for not calling it football - together you spend 4 months trying to find a team to play volleyball with, only to find one the week before you go home.

You realize, as the numbers left in the dormitory start shrinking and everyone heads home, to the ones who matter it is a see you later, not a good bye. You make plans to visit each other and you realize you are a much stronger person than you imagined. The nights that you spent feeling sorry for yourself are now overshadowed by the fact that you made it through 11 nights traveling by yourself, a feat you could not have done 5 months previous.

To all my Schelmenwasen friends - thank you for the journey.

Emily