

2010

The Beauty and the Pain of Leaving and Coming Home

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Recommended Citation

Korn, Sarah, "The Beauty and the Pain of Leaving and Coming Home" (2010). *2011-12 Postcards*. Article. Submission 19.

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Postcard from Heidelberg, Germany

Year 2010-2012 The Beauty and the Pain of Leaving and Coming Home

I cried three times, the day I flew home. The morning felt like any other morning, just colder, since I was up at 3. Like the time I woke up so early for my terrible trip to England, the cool breeze from the Neckar coming in from my open window, greeting me, curious as to why I was awake so early. I was awake, checking everything twice, and then again. The walls were bare, all my photos, calendars and flags, the license plate I'd found on the side of the road that night I took a walk with Krista, the coaster Cory wrote me a poem on, the letters from friends and family I'd received while abroad all packed neatly in my two bags. I just didn't think it could be true, I didn't believe I was leaving. Not that the Wartburg was a particularly nice place to live—fraternity-owned houses rarely are, and I was definitely looking forward to not sharing a bathroom with 4 other men, but it had been my home for 11 months, and I cherished so many memories that had been made in it. Getting to the airport was perfectly hectic; I would have been worried if it had been too easy. Cory and I had to sit with the luggage while Brock and Haleigh sat in a compartment, but I didn't mind.

We checked our luggage, then said goodbye to Cory, whose departure time had snuck up on us. A few minutes later, we realized Haleigh needed to go to a different terminal, than I did, and we realized we were saying goodbye. It was not like I imagined it, in the middle of the escalators between the upper and lower train station, crying as I hugged my best friend of 11 months almost to the day, doing my best to hold back as much as I could, knowing how she was not prone to emotional outbursts as I am.

The hours passed slowly, as Brock and I read the paper and talked about what it would be like to be back in the United States. "I'm going to go to a grocery store and lay down in the aisle spread out just because there's so much space, and nobody is going to yell at me for it" Brock said. Imagining this made me laugh, as I had no doubt this was a possibility. We played chess and napped, waiting for it to be time for us to part ways. When we did, it was with a hug and a promise to stay in touch and that we'd see each other at the 20th AJY reunion, wherever we ended up planning for it to be.

I went through passport control, and felt so proud when I was able to easily converse with the border policeman in German, and he looked up in surprise and told me "wie schön, dass Sie Deutsch sprechen." After I bought my last purchase in Germany (three Ritter Sports of course), settled in on the plane and began to realize what was happening, I silently began to sob. I tried not to alarm my seatmates, or the stewardesses and other passengers, but nobody seemed to notice me, which I counted as a plus. I cried for all the things I knew I would miss and all the things I would find out only once I returned to the US that I missed. I know the sleep deprivation was also a part, but it was my farewell, and I was so sad to go and so happy to be seeing my family again. It was a time of very confusing tears.

I had a layover in Chicago of just an hour and a half, during which I needed to go through customs, move my bags to the new carrier, meet up with a friend I knew through AJY who lived in Chicago, get to my new terminal, and get on my next plane. It was a teensy bit stressful, but I got through customs (lied about the sausage my host family had given me that I was giving to my real family) and got my bags on their way and found Mark. Seeing Mark not in Heidelberg was incredibly weird. We construct these ideas of where we know people from, what world they belong to, and when those are shifted, it takes an adjustment. Mark and I talked about Heidelberg, crammed in as much about what had happened in our lives since December in a half an hour, and then I said goodbye, and promised to keep writing. I was sort of in shock the whole line through security- everyone was talking all at once it seemed, a cacophony of words that were familiar and unclouded in my mind, the way German words sometimes are. Strangers were talking to one another, but the strangest part was when I was in line to get on my last plane, the one to Atlanta, and someone said “go ahead, darlin’ ”to me. “Darlin’?” I thought, “Did he just call me “darlin’ ”? BUT I DON’T EVEN KNOW HIM!” I forgot that we Americans talk to one another as if we know each other, as if we’re long lost friends, or family. It was something no German would have ever said to me in that context, and I was flummoxed as to why he was talking to me.

Before take-off, the tears started up for the third time—I asked myself if I would ever be able to get on a plane and not cry— but this time they were more of an overwhelmed kind. I was back in my homeland but I was confused by my own countrymen and women. I missed Germany already, I didn’t want to be on an airplane for one more second, and I wanted to go home to Heidelberg so I could go to bed because I was exhausted. I fell asleep before we even took off.

The terminal in Atlanta was empty except for my flight, and I made my way through, following all the exit signs, not knowing exactly how I felt. Then I saw my sister, in her slippers and pajamas—it was 1am, way past her six-year-old bedtime— and the smile that broke out across her face made all the tears I’d cried that day completely worth it; I had forgotten what she looked like in real life-her missing front teeth seemed more real than they had on Skype, and as I scooped her up, my heart squeezed with how much I had missed that. I hugged her close for a very long time.

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