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Journalism
6/18/2019

Best Laid Plans

5/19/19 1:19 A.M. Austin, Texas. Plan E

My glasses fog over as I walk through the sliding glass doors of the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport baggage claim. Heat radiates up from the grey concrete even though the sun set a long time ago. I breathe in the damp, night air and wait for my glasses to clear up on their own, as I have my suitcase in one hand and my heavy carry-on bag slung precariously over my shoulder, slipping off because my backpack straps have already claimed the territory. Near me, an airport security guard harasses some black guys waiting for their UBER and I feel I must finally be home in Texas. For better or worse.

5/18/19 7:04 P.M. Washington D.C. Plan E

Getting home had been my singular goal all semester. But instead of a race to be won, it felt more like the escalator I was riding, moving at a predestined pace, trapped behind a group of people who had no intention of moving, even though the rest of us clearly had planes to catch. Mine was the last plane to Texas that night, set to land on May 19th at 1 A.M. in Austin, Texas.

“Anywhere in Texas,” I remember saying. “Just please find me a flight to Texas and I’ll get home from there.”

You could hear them before you could see them, the other passengers on the last flight to Texas. I could tell the big group of them were from Dallas because of the way they

pronounce their “I”s like “A”s and the way the ladies had styled their hair. “The higher the hair, the closer to God.” Or rather, “The *hagher* the hair, the closer to God.” I sat down as far away as I could in that tiny, little gate. I couldn’t imagine how small the plane was going to be, with so few of us waiting for it.

“Did you come in from Florence? I thought I recognized you from the airport.” I turned to see who was talking to me, and found myself smiling at a young, blonde woman with a Fjallraven backpack at her feet. She sipped her iced coffee while she waited for me to confirm her suspicions.

“Yeah, what a fucking mess that was,” I responded.

5/18/19 10:49 A.M. The runway of the Florence-Peretola Airport, Italy. Plan D

The Florence-Peretola Airport in Italy was small. It had 5 gates and today, just like at the end of every academic year, it witnessed a mass exodus of several thousand international students trying to leave the city all at once. Several of the planes meant to depart that day didn’t even get off the ground and most were late. I felt sorry for the two students next to me whose 1 hour layover was quickly shrinking to 10 minutes. They planned their route while we were still on the plane, fully intending on sprinting through the Frankfurt International Airport to make it to their flight home to Denver.

It's not that most people were in a hurry to leave. Most people I met over the last semester would have given almost anything to stay longer, but the real world held responsibilities that they had to face back home— whether it was in Boston or St. Louis or some tiny town in West Virginia. I felt sorry for myself too. With the delay, it would be

almost impossible to figure out how to get on my plane to Houston. And Lord knows I didn't want to spend another minute on this miserable continent.

I guess that isn't fair to Europe. I saw a lot of amazing things and the food lived up to the hype. It wasn't Italy's fault that my life began to fall apart the moment I got off the train into the city center and was assaulted by the stench of a city filled to bursting with tourists and cars that were never meant to drive on those cobblestones.

1/25/19 11:40 P.M. Georgetown, Texas. Plan A

I don't exactly have high expectations. I just want to get some travel experience while I can get a school to pay for most of it. So why Italy?

"The food. Definitely the food"

My boyfriend and I are doing long distance. "It won't be as bad as you think," I was told by people in such situations, "The dynamic might change a little, but it'll be good." I'm going to get my last two sociology courses taken care of, the classes will be interesting-stuff I couldn't take at Southwestern. I've just finished applying for the last of many summer internships and feel pretty good about a few of them.

3/11/19 1:01 P.M. Florence, Italy. Plan B

Scheduling conflicts require me to choose between sociology and communication. I could have done one capstone this semester and the other the next semester except that I had wanted to study abroad. Thank god for my roommates, so I have friends awake at the same

times I am to talk to when things fall apart. I choose communication and I wait to hear back from one of the internships.

5/18/19 12:55 P.M. Frankfurt, Germany. Plan D

Frankfurt was just the latest in a long line of plans that fell apart during my last semester. Wandering around the enormous airport with my all my baggage felt like the quintessential metaphor for the way I had felt the whole semester. I couldn't even pretend to be surprised, just a little hopeless.

The ex-boyfriend would be running through this same airport in less than 24 hours. Long distance is just too long when you know it'll be 6 months before you can talk in person again. Being in Europe hit pause on my life, but I was the only one standing still, waiting until I could get home and have friends and hobbies and pet strangers' dogs again.

"What if I just get stranded here," I remember thinking. It hadn't been a question. It was more like a plan B (or was it C?). My visa lasts till the end of the month. Although, if they deported me, getting home might be more straightforward. Plan B, plan C, plan D— I couldn't even remember which one I was on at this point.

Maybe I had screwed myself. The thought rattled around in my brain for the hundredth time. If I've learned anything in my life, it's that you have to live with the choices you made in the circumstances you were given.

I'm getting lost in the crowd streaming through the airport as I try to push through dull panic. I needed to find the United Airlines help desk. The help desk was next to the baggage check-in in terminal A. *You can't miss it.* I can't find it.

“Excuse me sir, please,” I say to the next person I see with a badge on, “I can’t find terminal A. People just keep pointing me in different directions.”

He responded in a mediated German accent, “Once they clear up the bomb threat, they’ll let people back into terminal A.”

Holy shit.

Well it’s not like I was in much of a hurry. The Houston flight had left long ago and I had nothing waiting for me back home. Nothing really.

4/24/19 5:45 P.M. Florence, Italy. Plan C

I didn’t even get a single phone interview. Every follow up email yielded a rejection. I’m emailing my professor to take his journalism class and my dad tells me he isn’t disappointed. I’m going on a date. At least I’m not the only queer kid in this entire country.

I was running away from Italy, but not towards anything.

5/18/19 12:55 P.M. Frankfurt, Germany. Plan Whatever

One bomb threat down, I was able to make my way to the United Airlines help desk, where I promptly burst into tears. That’s when I knew the stress of that long day was wearing on me. When I regained as much of my composure as I could, I tried to explain the situation as I knew it.

I woke up at 7am with my bags packed to bursting. My roommate and I got ready to wait outside our tiny apartment for a taxi to come rumbling down the narrow alleyway and

sweep us away to the airport. We exchanged teary hugs with the three other girls we had spent most of the last 2,648 hours with.

We knew the day would be perilous when we walked through the main doors of the airport to find it busier than we had ever seen it. My roommate's problems began when she realized the longest line was for the airline she was supposed to fly. As it would happen, her's was one of several planes that were delayed until the following day, but she wouldn't find that out until she had waited 6 hours. Mine began when I handed my bag over to the woman at the Lufthansa desk who tagged it with a Frankfurt destination label.

"Um, excuse me ma'am, that should say Houston. My last stop is in Houston."

"No," the woman replied in that thick northern Italian accent that had taken me so long to understand well. "Your flight is to Frankfurt, in Germany."

"Yes, I stop in Germany, but I'm supposed to keep going to Houston."

"It doesn't say Houston. I can't send your bag to Houston if you're not going to Houston." The panic started to rise in my throat and I just wanted her to stop saying Houston, dropping the H, making the word roll off her tongue as if my problem was rain rolling off her metaphorical umbrella.

I wished I had an umbrella as I and the other passengers splashed across the tarmac to the plane that would take us to Frankfurt after an almost hour long delay. I had no choice but to give that woman my luggage and just figure out a new plan once I landed in Germany. What was the phrase? "Best laid plans of mice and men something, something, something." I had also planned to be a double major with a super cool summer internship and have

awesome welcome-home-sex with my boyfriend, but I had dug myself a boot shaped grave and now I had to lie in it.

It would have been poetic, a full circle ending, if I had made it onto that plane to Houston. I had begun my journey, making it real, finally, by driving to Houston to get my visa. I should have known I was in for a rough semester when the woman examined my passport and then me.

“You don’t look anything like this photo,” she accused, waving my precious document in her hand.

It was true. My hair was short and bright blue, not the shoulder length, blonde I sported in the picture. I also had glasses now. But I only said, “The picture is from a long time ago.”

She made a co-worker, or perhaps a supervisor, inspect the passport. As if someone like me were planning to sneak into Italy under the guise of a semester abroad. As if I was smart enough to be admitted into the school, but didn’t think to make myself look like the girl who’s identity I was apparently stealing.

Privately, I admit that she’s got a point. I don’t look anything like the girl in the photo. That girl had a plan and looked like the kind of girl who could pull it off one day. She didn’t worry too much about her family’s expectations because you never notice those expectations until you fall short of an ideal you hadn’t been aware of. My family held their breath when I dyed my hair then cut it all off. My grandma still doesn’t know about my tattoo. But it's okay. Despite all that, I was doing everything right.

I like full circle endings and stories that wrap up nicely with a bow. It makes me feel like there is an order to the world, as if everything that happens is for a reason. This is not a story with a full circle ending.

5/18/19 12:55 P.M. Frankfurt, Germany. Plan 04

I didn't land in Houston. Instead, this is what happened: My original booking was a round trip ticket from Austin, Texas to Florence, Italy. I would have 2 layovers each way. So, in March, when the company I had booked with emailed me saying that there had been a change— now it was Florence to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Houston, Houston to Austin— I jumped on the opportunity. I asked them if I could just get off in Houston. It would be an easy drive, and my parents were more than willing to pick me up since I had left San Antonio at New Years and they were anxious to see me after so long. An hour long flight to Austin wouldn't even be worth it.

No problem, according to the agent. It's an easy change to make. In the end, the cards were not in my favor despite how they appeared on the surface. Sometime between March and May, wires got crossed. Lufthansa, the original airline, passed the Houston half of the flight on to their partner, United Airlines. Perhaps it was a computer error, or human, but that information didn't all make it into the correct systems, and I, the only one flying into Frankfurt from Florence and out of Frankfurt to Houston, slipped through the cracks. This was the story pieced together between myself and the lovely people at the United Airlines help desk. They gave me a new ticket. As it turned out "anywhere in Texas" was smack dab

in the middle. The ticket they booked me was the last flight to Austin, with a layover in Washington D.C..

“That’s okay.” They gave me a free lunch ticket. *Do I like thai food?* I was told where to find some, just down the escalators at the end of the long hallway and a left. I was tired of pasta and still am, but asian noodles are different.

5/19/19 1:21 A.M. Austin, Texas. Plan IV

I was falling asleep at the baggage claim. I watched through half lidded eyes as the conveyor belt rumbled to life and coffee girl glided up to it, grabbing two sleek, black suitcases, all matching with bright, turquoise luggage tags. Then she disappeared into the warm night. I imagined she was bursting with her favorite “study abroad experiences” to tell to whomever picked her up.

I’m wide awake, though, when I see my friend’s car pull up to the sidewalk ahead of me. The security guard comes over yelling about no parking, but we’ve already got my bags in the trunk before he can spit the words out. My friend and savior hugs me and I promise to buy him food on the way back to Georgetown. I think about the many times I have driven this highway, the dreaded I-35, dropping off and picking up other friends from this airport. He tells me about how the city is doing more construction (endless construction), making it look different than when I left. I knew about the new bookstore in town, but there’s a new coffee shop too. I make a mental note— would that be backup plan F? I believed that my life was on pause that whole semester, but as my plans slipped through my fingers I adapted. I’d adapt to whatever changes getting back to Georgetown would bring as well.

Author's Note:

I didn't want to write about my study abroad experience, because I didn't like my study abroad experience. However, it happened to be one of the more recent formative events in my life, so I decided to compromise and write about coming home. In writing this, I hoped to be able to display that mix of feelings and lay it out as if the trip home was like a mini Odyssey. I'm glad I took someone's advice and wrote in a journal while I was away because it was really helpful to go back and read the notes I had made about how I was feeling during my semester. It's been a month since I got home and the whole thing is starting to feel like a fever dream. I'm settling into a new reality, different than in Italy and different from the year before. Reading my notes was kind of difficult. It brought back a lot of really shitty feelings, but I'm very grateful to be home with my people again. It's weird to be able to see my progression of feelings as I struggled to make Florence feel like home. It never really did, but maybe that's okay.