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Travel Sized: A Collection of Essays

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TRAVEL SIZED: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College
of Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
English

by

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May, 2014

For my family and dearest friends, you are my heart, what makes me *me*

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Abstract

Travel Sized: A Collection of Essays investigates the importance of memory and understanding the self in relation to one's experiences with travel and food. It is the author's contribution to the genre of creative nonfiction and explores themes of body, self-awareness and self-realization through events that shaped who she is, both personally and professionally. The collection houses eight essays—each focusing on space, the body, and exploration of memory to better understand one's self. Subjects range from coming to terms with one's size to appreciating one's experiences both stateside and abroad. At the center of the collection is the need, no, the desire to recognize one's own limitations and to learn from them—to stretch one's level of comfort to become the person she is meant to be.

Navigating the Comfort Zone: Memory and the Body in the Personal Essay

What I know is this: comfort is my shield, my overcoat when I am feeling vulnerable, weak. And one of the things I take comfort in is food. I find pleasure in eating when I am happy, sad, bored, lonely, and stressed out. There are plenty of *conditions* that trigger emotional or binge eating, and I am familiar with most of them. Yet, food is also associated with memory. Slow cooked beef with potatoes and carrots immediately conjures up images of my house, my mother, and winter in my mind's eye. In turn, those images produce memories or, more specifically, *narratives* surrounding memory: my mother reading to me when I was a little girl; moving back home after living in Massachusetts for a year; sleigh riding with my friends when we were kids. I associate those memories with food yet again—sipping hot cocoa before bedtime, grilling steaks on the porch, enjoying warm, chocolate chip cookies after playing in the snow. This creates a cycle that ultimately ends in me trying to better understand why I eat the way I do.

As a result of cloaking myself in comfort food, I have become a self-proclaimed “fat chick,” and I continually struggle with my size every day; as a result, I have given much thought to my body and the purpose it serves in terms of my writing. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, remind us that “life writing about the body has also enabled people to confront the destiny of the ill or impaired body” (53). I do not consider myself *impaired* per se, yet when I consider the effect my size (my body) has on my emotional state and when I *remember* how I feel when I cannot physically keep up with my friends, in particular, I see myself as one who has been, and who *is* harmed by her weight, her emotional

overeating, and by the memories underpinning it all. On one hand, then, my memories are wrapped in food and in turn are centered in the *weight* of my body (just over 430 pounds of it). Memories are there, but they are also “evoked by the senses—smell, taste, touch, sight, sound—and encoded in objects or events with particular meaning for the narrator” (Smith and Watson 27).

Smith and Watson then question what acts as triggers for memories (245) and where those memories reside. “[For] the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied” (49). For me, memories are *embodied* in the senses; memories surface (or are triggered) when I *see* (and *touch*) my dog Pebbles’ bright, neon pink collar that she wore for the last year or so of her life. Seeing it or holding it in my hand brings back memories of her greeting me at the door; her little nub of a tail shaking her entire backside as she brought me a “present” (usually a toy or a sock, anything she could pick up); in those memories, I remember a healthy dog that made me smile every day.

At the same time, that collar also reminds me that Pebbles cannot greet me after I’ve been working all day because she’s gone now. I remember sitting with her and stroking her fur while she spent her last moments at home; her once strong body, sleek black, struggling for final breath, and me struggling later to carry her outside to be taken to a pet crematorium where I would leave her body only to carry her back home—in a small wooden box, her name, Pebbles, across the front on a gold plate.

That collar produces a *physical* reaction every time I see it—smiles of happiness as I think about the time I spent watching her stretch out on her back and “ride her

bicycle,” or tears of sadness that she had many days when she didn’t want to eat and I had to spoon feed her like she was a toddler, not quite ready to use her utensils on her own.

Memories surface in my mind’s eye when I *hear* certain people speak. It doesn’t matter what they say (now), but I am immediately transported back to a time when what they did say mattered to me. Every time I hear my undergraduate creative writing teacher and former member of the book group I am in speak at an academic function, I hear her tell me and my other friends that she no longer wants to participate in book group because she finds us dull, uneducated, and not worth her time.

We were in my other friend’s kitchen when she told us, having just had a lengthy discussion about *Memoirs of a Geisha*. She had participated all day, been pleasant to all of us, and then told us that we bored her and that she had better things to do with her time. This was someone I had admired, someone I trusted, someone I thought was my friend, and that is what I remember every time I hear her voice—grainy and low, with a hint of condescension on her lips, as she smiled when she left the house. And I know now—having confronted this memory head on every time I come in contact with her—that she is part of the reason I don’t give myself enough credit, about my intelligence, my ability to write, etc. Memories, then, some of them anyway, can cause me to question myself and my abilities. Building new memories, or facing ones like these, however, help me confront my insecurities and overcome them.

Smith and Watson also argue that “the ability to recover memories, in fact, depends on the material body” (49) and that “the embodied materiality of memory and consciousness is grounded in neurological, physiological, and biochemical systems” (49) further establishing that memory is embodied in the senses and can produce a physical

reaction. *Smells* produce memories and physical reactions to those memories. When I *smell* chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven, I remember my mom making platefuls when I was a child, and immediately, my mouth begins to salivate and I want to eat those cookies, all of them. Because that smell coupled with that memory evokes good feelings, I eat thus adding to my struggle with weight. Even *tasting* those cookies brings about those memories of my mom in the kitchen and again makes me eat more because I want to recapture, re-imagine those moments again and again.

Thus, my memories are embodied in my senses and in my weight, and anything from a dog's collar to a familiar voice or smell can cause those memories—good and bad—to surface, and I work through them (more often than not) with food.

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Memory, to me, is also a means of escape, but it is an escape fraught with danger. What I mean by this is that I can recall events and past experiences that are very pleasant to me as I have indicated in the previous paragraph, but it is the *painful* memory—the *honest* memory—that I struggle to confront. As I write in the essay “The Hen Party,” when I find myself in that struggle, though,

It's much easier to go back to what I know than to do something that's less familiar. I admit that I don't like change, and I don't like doing something that is hard. Who does? I'm not, nor have I ever been, someone who likes a challenge. It's not supposed to be easy; otherwise, it wouldn't be a challenge, right? I don't like to struggle to solve or sort something out. It's much easier to be complacent, to do what I know. There's comfort in that, even if it isn't what is best for me. I can recognize triggers or what

makes me return to what I know, yet I don't do anything to stop them from having the same effect on me again and again and again. Change scares me, and when I'm confronted with it whether I'm at work or thinking about my eating habits, I revert back to what I know because it's safe. (133)

Even though I know that the *future* I must face is that of change, that is something with which I continually grapple and explore in my thesis *Travel Sized*.

In his text *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, essayist David Shields toys with many ideas involving memory, and those ideas have scrambled my egg-rattled brain as I move closer to creative nonfiction and less towards fiction in my writing. I take pleasure in both, and I will continue to write in both genres, as they help sculpt who I am and who I am becoming, both personally and professionally. Using memory as another layer for my foundation as a writer will only serve both genres, as memory allows me to write from personal experience in both. To write what I know strengthens my work, whether it is creative nonfiction or fiction. Both genres have their own expectations and power. Creative nonfiction allows me to explore facets of *my life* by drawing upon *my memories*. Such exploration provides me with the opportunity to better understand who I am. At the same time, fiction gives me another outlet through which I can explore what I have experienced from a fresh position; by allowing me to distance myself from the subject, I acquire a certain freedom that I do not readily give myself in creative nonfiction.

To use my own experiences, my knowledge, and the events that have impacted me allows me both to explore facets of myself (i.e. creative nonfiction) and to develop intriguing and authentic *others* through my characters in fiction. Such a dual purpose

complicates the lines between the genres—a complication Shields finds necessary to getting at the real *truth* of the matter. He argues that “the work be allowed to go wherever it needs to go to excavate its subject” (70); likewise, I write in both creative nonfiction and fiction, *according to the subject*, but for the purposes of this essay, I emphasize how memory and self-awareness help to create such nonfiction works and where memory resides in the body.

The most difficult part of creative nonfiction is having to confront the *truth* of something, some event, or some aspect of myself or others that I am finally ready to acknowledge or accept. And because “we manipulate our memories to include or omit certain aspects” (Shields 57), I struggle with the honesty of creative nonfiction as both a reader and a practitioner. It is only fair that I question what I am being told in a creative nonfiction piece, and so when I choose to write in this genre myself, I need to approach the topic in an honest and self-aware manner and therefore resist the urge to put myself in a neat, favorable light. Doing so means risking the reader’s judgment of my honest admissions—an uncomfortable proposition for someone who quite honestly *wants* her reader’s approval.

How important, then, is it that my readers like me? This desire to be liked, to be accepted, has had a tremendous effect on my psyche. So much so that I find myself editing my work as I compose it on the page. I worry too much about what other people (my readers, friends, family, and professors) will think about me when they read my work. I have had to learn some tricks to compose as honestly as I can: for example, I block the screen so that I cannot see what I write. When I do this, I am able to be in my head with my own thoughts, and I do not concern myself so much with taking segments

out or putting them in. What is imperative is that I get it down on the page, raw and unmediated because, at the end of the day, it is more important that I not only learn something about myself but that my *readers* learn something as well—that they recognize and therefore identify with me. Regardless of our sizes, our stations in life, etc., part of being human means sharing similar problems and concerns as we navigate the world. Identifying with each other is key, no matter the form or genre we use when we write.

What is most important is that I confront these memories and these experiences head on and identify how I really feel, or how I felt, in that moment. Through these events, I learn not only about myself but about others, in turn. For example, in the first essay of my thesis, “Size Is Relative,” I am faced with what I presume impacts other young women’s identities in a traditional household—a father who, although very loving towards his daughter, desires a son to carry on the family name; it is very important to him. This experience, whether I wanted to admit it or not, helped shape who I am in some ways, for,

I wanted to be like my dad. Big, strong, and resistant to the hurts that I sometimes faced when at the mercy of my classmates or family. When my dad sat down at the table for dinner, I watched him eat. If he cleared his plate, so did I. I wanted to be like him at least in that way, because I could never be what he wanted me to be—a boy. He said that often or at least that’s what I remember. “I wish I had a son to carry on the family name,” but I know now that he didn’t say what I heard then. What I heard was “I want a son to carry on the family name, *instead of you, a girl.*”

What I heard was that he didn't want me; he wanted something else—
something better, something different, something not female. (19)

After putting pen to page, I know now that I felt rejected by my father and became resolved to be as much like him as I could so that he would forget that I was a girl. I turned to food. I ate as much as he did and gradually gained more and more weight until that desire to be accepted by my father was no longer the cause of my binge eating. By then, I had many more reasons for my eating to spiral out of control. I used food as a means to cope with all sorts of feelings ranging from rejection to comfort to self-protection to happiness and everything in between. I still do, but focusing on these ideas, I can begin to understand and accept why I turn to food and travel as a means of escape and as coping mechanisms.

By confronting these ideas, these feelings, and by being as honest as I can towards them, I give myself permission to say *to hell with what other people think*. Only then I can truly begin to understand myself—all of me, even the ugly parts. For example, I can admit that I am jealous. When I was little, I was jealous of this imagined son my dad always wanted. As an adult, I am jealous of those who have more than I do—more money, more success. I want to be like them, but instead of taking risks like they do, instead of putting myself out there, I shrink back into myself and do what I do best. I compensate by eating. It is a temporary fix with long term problems. What bothers me most—as I pose in the essay “Size Is Relative”—is that I know that, so why can't I change? Why don't I *want* to change? I wrestle with these questions, and come to realize,

It's my crutch. It's my security—this fat. I know that it surrounds me, protects me—at least I think it does. Whether I want to admit it or not, I still think about what my dad said from time to time, about his desire for a son. No matter what I do in life, will I ever be good enough? Not for him—he loves me and is proud of me, I know that now. I mean for me. Will I ever be good enough for me? I wonder if I will ever lose weight and permanently keep it off. If I can, will I open myself up to new, possibly even better experiences? I know that on some level I will always crave that safety. When I over-analyze and think about what it means to be a fat chick, I know that in the end being fat doesn't offer any protection, not really. I still suffer the same hurts, the same frustrations, the same fears that slimmer people have. (27-28)

All writers, both creative nonfiction and fiction alike, understand “how...events [make] sense to us and fit into our experience” (Shields 58). Putting said events down on paper helps us to realize their importance in how they shaped our lives, and how they continue to influence or affect us today. When Stephen King invites his readers into his non-fictional world in his memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, he explains how, for example, the lack of a television influenced him as a writer. “Television came relatively late to the King household” (King 34); as a result, King spent most of his time reading and using his imagination to keep himself and his brother entertained. As he recalls this particular memory on the page, it becomes obvious to his readers how the lack of media entertainment helped shape who he is today. Similarly, his drug addiction and subsequent intervention staged by his wife also had an impact on his identity as a writer,

as a husband, as a person (King 96). What happens in our lives inherently shapes who we are, in one way or the other, and by facing those memories, we come to know ourselves as well as those around us. Memory and, more specifically, committing that memory to paper is central to the work of the creative nonfiction writer.

Yet, though I might confront my memories head on, I know that “the genius of memory is that it is choosy, chancy, and temperamental” (Shields 59). I have come to believe that there is yours, mine, and ours when it comes to memory. A friend of mine, a friend I have known for years, often “mis-remembers” events that we have both experienced. At least *I* think she mis-remembers, but in her memory, these events happened exactly the way she recounts them later, even if I disagree with her about what happened or who was involved or what was said. Is there ever a definitive truth, then, to memory, or is it only subject to interpretation by those involved in the event itself? Does memory then become our own, personal reality?

Smith and Watson argue that “on a daily basis we move in and out of various communities of memory—religious, racial, ethnic, gendered, familial. Communities develop their own occasions, rituals, archives, and practices of remembering” (25). Such acknowledgement makes me wonder, alongside them, if there is indeed a “necessity [for] remembering differently” (Smith and Watson 25). Even if the moment is recorded, both auditorily and visually, the recording becomes an “‘artificial’ memory...as aids to preserving and passing on memories, [shaping] the memories conveyed and the selves those memories construct” (25). That is, the *records* our memories form bear a specific purpose or significance for the formation of our identities; our perspective naturally frames our memories, and our memories, in turn, inform who we are and who we

become, and that person is in charge of how the record is formed. We see the event/moment from that person's perspective—not our own.

Essentially, we take away what we feel is most pertinent about an event. It is important, then, to remember differently; otherwise, we cannot grow or ever truly understand who we are or who want to become. In the end, perhaps there is never a *real* truth but only our interpretation of it, and maybe that is what matters.

Along the way, it is important to note that “the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering” (Smith and Watson 22). If we process what happens to us in our lives, if we remember it, write it down, then perhaps we can step back and examine what has happened in our lives, compare those experiences to other people and realize that we are not alone. At the same time we reflect and compare, we can take what we learn from our experiences, couple that with what other people have learned, and become better for it.

Fear itself, though, can hinder the writing process. In *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King argues that “fear is at the root of most bad writing” (127) and that “good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation” (128). It is true, I hold myself back; whether it is intentional or not, the heart of the matter is that when I write creative nonfiction, I find myself worrying about what other people will think—those who read my work and more importantly, those who were involved in the experience (memory) itself. And when this worry creeps in, I turn toward those writers who write about fear *fearlessly*.

Likewise, I composed the essay "So Long, Sanibel" with the intention of exploring many memories of going to different beaches, but I soon realized that the

memory I most needed to explore, to work through, was about that particular trip to Sanibel. How I let myself be bullied and manipulated into doing things that I didn't want to do while at the same time recognizing qualities in myself that weren't altogether pleasing.

Still, it is difficult to leave myself raw and exposed on the page because it means that I am allowing others to see *all* of me—the hurts, the scars, the secrets. It is brutal and at the same time refreshing—this putting one's self in the spotlight so that all of one's peccadillos are exposed. In Sanibel, I learned that I, like Andie another young woman on the trip, was spoiled, self-centered, and eager to have things my way—the way I wanted them. And when I didn't get things my way, I pouted. I retreated with a book to the beach, where I didn't have to deal with the other women on the trip with me:

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, Andie and I were a lot alike. I still lived at home. I had my own hesitations about leaving the place where I grew up; I had moved out for about a year but came back home. I returned to where I felt safe; whether or not my parents needed me (and they did), especially as they aged and had health problems; I wanted to be there. It was my comfort zone. Like Andie, I depended on my mom. We did things together. And she spoiled me. And Cheryl spoiled Andie. I don't think she could help it any more than my mom could. And like Andie, I was used to getting my way. My mom would have taken my side, the way Cheryl did with Andie. (74-75)

Those revelations, and others, left me feeling ugly, exposed; I didn't think I was a nice person. I wasn't good. I wouldn't be perceived the way I wanted, but by examining

those aspects of myself and coming to understand them, I learned that “the story [I] ‘remember’ is covering the ‘real story,’ anyway” (Shields 56). The advantage of exposing all my flaws, insecurities, and defects allows my readers to share in them—to experience them with me, creating a trust between me and my readers who see themselves in me, or at least can identify with aspects of my experience.

The *real* story is that I was miserable and let myself be miserable for the duration of the trip. Although, in the beginning, my friends excluded me often from their adventures, I ultimately began to exclude myself and then made myself believe I had been victimized even more. It was childish. I was hurt, and I suppose on some level I wanted them to feel bad that they weren’t including me. And, then, later I wanted them to feel badly when I did not want to be included.

In the end, I learned from my writing about this experience that I could have been more honest about my feelings at the time; that I should have spoken up when I felt manipulated or bullied. That I could have enjoyed that trip a little more if I had been more open and honest about my feelings. But I didn’t. I hid them away, and I’m sure I hid them under layers of food, in Sanibel and after I came home.

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We manipulate memory, mold it and shape it like clay, into something we can stomach. We make what happened to us palatable, not just for us but for the rest of the world. We have to make it manageable, especially if we feel that it’s something we need to survive. If we cannot stomach what has happened, if we can’t face it, we open ourselves to new wounds, new hurts.

Memory, shaping it the way we want, is at once a painful examination and coping mechanism, just as binge eating is. It takes real courage, though, real bravery to see ourselves as others might see us and to be honest about whom we really are. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Maybe we can only be as honest as we can, at that moment. Looking back, examining the past and trying to understand it, will allow us to open up about ourselves and who we are.

As I have experienced, while writing these essays, creative nonfiction allows us the opportunity to better understand ourselves and those around us, which offers us—and, as I have argued, the reader—a sense of understanding. When we write, we confront our humanity. We are fallible. We make mistakes. We have regrets. We say (or don't say) what we want; we avoid situations that make us uncomfortable; we don't like change. We stick with what we know, even if we know that deep down change would be for the better. Maybe, just maybe, it is okay to make myself a little bit more vulnerable—and this, for now, is *change* enough.

“Size Is Relative”

I have never been skinny. As a child, I was always bigger than my cousins or classmates, and I was always aware that I was different, not exactly like the other kids. We would play “kiss-chase” at school, but none of the boys wanted to chase me until my cousin Mindy would insist that at least one of them chase me or we wouldn’t play with them. I could run just as fast or as hard as the other girls, but I wasn’t little, skinny, blonde with wide smiles and bright eyes. I had dimples, sure. But I had a belly full of jelly and little interest in replacing it with fruits and vegetables.

I wanted to be like my dad. Big, strong, and resistant to the hurts that I sometimes faced when at the mercy of my classmates or family. When my dad sat down at the table for dinner, I watched him eat. If he cleared his plate, so did I. I wanted to be like him at least in that way, because I could never be what he wanted me to be—a boy. He said that often or at least that’s what I remember. “I wish I had a son to carry on the family name,” but I know now that he didn’t say what I heard then. What I heard was “I want a son to carry on the family name, *instead of you, a girl.*” What I heard was that he didn’t want me; he wanted something else—something better, something different, something not female.

I was his only child—the only one he would ever have. He had entertained the idea of having a son but that became a distant memory. Difficult births, a stillborn child, and the decision to have a vasectomy to thwart possible heartbreak stole that from him. But it was still something he wanted, something he had to give up on a long time ago. But that didn’t mean that he didn’t think about it or say it out loud from time to time.

The first time I remember him saying that he wanted a son I was going somewhere with both him and my mom. I was sitting in the back seat, probably playing with my old raggedy doll, Hazel Baby, and ignoring the adult talk, so I'm not sure what led up to his saying, "I wish I had a son, to carry on the family name." Maybe my mom told him that someone in the family was having a baby and they started talking about their own dreams gone awry. But I remember looking up from Hazel Baby's face, confused. *What about me? I'm here. Why can't I carry on the family name?*

And that remark never quite left me. It lingered, a wound that never quite healed until I was much older. Dad told me that he was proud of me, that I was his "best invention," that he loved me. But in the back of my mind, I would think, *Yes, but I'm not a boy. I'm not your son.* It took a long, long time, years, for me to finally hear what he really meant. "I wish I had a son to carry on the family name *in addition to you.*"

Because we didn't have much in common, I tried to find ways to be like him. Food was our common denominator, that and enjoying movies.

So it's no surprise that I steadily gained weight. And it's no surprise that the boys at school didn't want to chase me during recess but were far more interested in other girls. The ones who were just right. Pretty, fast on their feet, but graceful. Who knew the right things to say or how to tilt their heads just so when they didn't, making them appear mysterious but just a bit coy later when they became teenagers and young adults. The ones who laughed only when it was appropriate, and then only in a soft, melodious undertone. Just enough to show their interest in what the boys were saying.

Films and books (a love for reading came from my mom) comforted me. In them, I found the stories that brought snorts of laughter mingled with tears and the ones that

crushed my heart and made me curl under the covers and sob. In them, I found stories about girls like me—who felt they didn't fit in, who weren't like the other girls at their schools, who wanted happiness and love to fill their days. When I read those stories, I became those girls, even if it was for a brief time.

Through books and film, I found an escape, to places I wanted to see and explore. I learned what I wanted to do with my life; I wanted to write, to tell my own stories so that the girls who came after me would have someone with whom they could identify. I wanted to become a woman, happy with her family, aware of her differences but accepting of them, and willing to go places and see things that her parents always talked about but never actually did.

So I wasn't always aware of my size. It took a long time for me to really see myself as a larger woman. As a child, I didn't understand body size, exactly, even though I knew I wasn't like my cousin Mindy, a small, wiry blonde with big, green eyes. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't see a chubby girl with dark brown hair and brown eyes. I didn't feel fat. I just saw me.

But there were plenty of people who wanted me to develop that awareness as a teenager. "But you have such a pretty face, Wendi," an aunt said to me one time. Probably during some holiday excursion at my Grama's. "It's such a shame that you don't have a boyfriend."

Why did I need a boyfriend? Why did these two things—a pretty face and a boyfriend—go hand in hand? Oh wait. I needed to get married, have kids, and I needed to be slimmer to fulfill that expectation. Instead, I found a quiet way to rebel. I donned black clothes, found a corner of Grama's house to blend into, and dived into books during

family events. I hoped to avoid those conversations, but although the comments eventually stopped, the questions began.

“Do you have a boyfriend now?”

No.

“Why not?”

Just haven't found the right one.

“You have such a pretty face. Such a shame.” Long pause. “What are studying in school?”

English.

“English?”

Yes.

“Are you going to teach school then?”

College, yes.

“Oh.” Another pause. “Well, then.”

Part of me knew that deep down they meant well, my relatives, that they wanted me to be happy. But part of me felt annoyed that I had to be defined by a relationship and that I had to have a pretty face and a slimmer physique to have that. Couldn't I be seen as something else—intelligent, thoughtful, giving?

We put labels on people to understand them, to understand ourselves. I do too. I sometimes refer to really skinny girls as stick insects with no souls, a clear reference to Helen Fielding's book *Bridget Jones' Diary*, which I love. I'm labeling them. Why? I don't dislike skinny girls any more than I dislike anyone else, yet I label them, just as they might label me. I'm sure it's because I'm jealous; they always look confident, sure

of themselves in their bright, pretty clothes. Whereas I...sometimes I just feel like the elephant in the room, awkward and bumbling. Deep down, I know they have their own set of body issues, that they too lack confidence when they need it most, that they are like me, but maybe it's just the way I cope with being a larger woman in a small society. This world is not made for people like me, from narrow restaurant booths to airplane seats, yet I try my best to fit in.

That's why I have labeled myself a fat chick. I use that term when I describe myself; sometimes I say I'm roly poly. Fat chick is what I use most though. If I label myself before someone else does, before someone calls me morbidly obese, I have already acknowledged my differences. I have addressed them myself, and no one else needs to.

I guess we all cope in our own ways, healthy or not.

Eating food, too much food, is a coping mechanism too. I know that. But what always baffles me is that I know these things—that overeating is not conducive to good health or maintaining a healthy weight, that exercise not only makes me feel good but helps me lose weight—yet I don't change. I'm not ready to change. Change has never been easy for me, and I sometimes think that if I lost the weight and kept it off that I wouldn't be me. I wouldn't be the Wendi that I know. And that scares the hell out of me because I love who I am. I'm just in a body that is bigger than most, and I feel awkward about it sometimes. Especially now that I am adult and have an understanding of who I am and of how big I really am, I think about size in terms of everything.

When I go to the movies, I find myself scoping out the seats. Not for the perfect one, exactly, but wondering if the armrests raise so that I can have that one extra inch of

room that I need. When they don't raise and the seats are narrow, I put my purse or jacket behind me to act as a pillow of sorts so that I'm sitting more upright and not tilted at some odd angle like I might slip out of the seat onto the floor. It's awkward, but it works.

In restaurants, I always ask for a table and not a booth because the booth tables are often secured to the wall and won't move, leaving little room for me to squeeze in comfortably. And why do I ask for a table anyway? It seems absurd. Even booths have tables. What I need to ask for is a pull out chair, but then I wonder about the chairs themselves. Seats with no arm rests always provide the best comfort or seats that are larger than life like the one I had at a restaurant years ago in Dayton.

I had already graduated from the University of Rio Grande (Rio Grande, Ohio) and had been working for some time in the human resources department at Oak Hill Community Medical Center when my friend Alta's father, Dr. Thompson, invited me to attend an Honors' Conference in Dayton, Ohio with them and the undergraduates in their charge. I agreed because it would be an opportunity to visit academia again, and I missed it. I missed hanging out with the smart kids, discussing literature and art and other brainy topics. Instead, I spent my days discussing insurance forms and new employee orientations.

Dr. Thompson escorted Alta and me to dinner the night before we left—the students having made their own plans for the evening. Just dinner at the hotel. A maître d' greeted us. His hotel name badge indicated his name was Tony. Tony was a tall, dark skinned man with a husky frame and friendly eyes—the kind that crinkle around the

edges like paper, the kind that suggested he possessed a humor that could make me clutch my belly in a fit of laughter if I got to know him.

“Hello and welcome,” he said. “Just three of you tonight?”

“Yes,” Dr. Thompson said.

Tony gathered menus, marked something on his table map, and said, “Right this way.” He led us through the restaurant to what would be our table for the evening.

I surveyed the scene—calculating the width of the seats and quickly deducing that I was going to be uncomfortable. The chairs were tall and narrow. If I could find a little bit of the potion Alice drank, I could make myself two sizes too small and enjoy my meal, but there was no potion. There was Tony.

He must have sensed my distress or made a conclusion based on his own observations or instincts. Did he know what it was like to be someone who didn’t quite fit? Who wanted to enjoy her meal and not have to worry about the armrests cutting into her sides while she ate? Who would, days later, look at herself in the mirror and see large bruises on the sides of her legs and become confused. *How the hell did I do that? Alien abduction? Oh no...it was the chair, at the restaurant.*

“Just a moment,” he said as he disappeared behind a large, green fern that hid him and other patrons from view.

He returned almost immediately, carrying a large, white wicker chair. Its back fanned out, its width more than I needed but very much appreciated. Tony moved the other chair out of the way and sat this one down in its place. “You should be comfortable,” he said as he pushed the chair under me as I sat down at the table. “You don’t need that other chair. This one is fit for a queen. Enjoy your meal.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Although the chair didn’t match the others at the table, I didn’t care. I enjoyed the food, the conversation that came with it, and never forgot Tony. He made my evening a little more special, and I still regret not really thanking him the way I should have. What I wanted to say instead of *thank you* was *you don’t know how much I appreciate that you considered me, considered my size, and knew that I wouldn’t enjoy myself. Thank you for thinking about my comfort.*

And when I go places, that is what I think about most: my comfort. Not only do I think about seating, I calculate things like the distance from Point A to Point B to determine the shortest route. And it’s not because I’m lazy; I don’t mind having to walk some distance to get to where I want to go, but like any person, any tourist, I just want to get there as quickly as possible. The shortest, most direct route makes sense. I don’t like getting lost. Just give me plenty of time to get there, and I will be fine. Give me a moment to observe the area, secure adequate seating, and all will be well.

Going my own pace. That’s what I like doing. I will get there, but I will see things along the way that will trigger my imagination or make me smile. And sometimes that’s just as important as the destination itself. Sometimes it’s about the (mis)adventures getting there too and the friends I made along the way.

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Sometimes I wonder if I will ever be skinny—skinnier, let’s say. I don’t want to be too thin, anymore than I want to be too fat. I am fat. Being self aware is an important step towards change. Sometimes I wonder if I really want to change. I know that I can change. I have.

What I worry about is not so much being fat but developing some long term illness as a result of the weight. I have been fortunate enough in forty years to NOT develop diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. I worry because I'm healthy now but might not always be. Genetics tells me that I'm predisposed to these ailments. My parents are both overweight; both of them have health issues. Mom has had problems with high blood pressure, cholesterol, and has been diabetic for as long as I can remember. In fact, diabetes was one of the problems that has complicated her life since her first pregnancy years ago. It is a problem that has never gone away and one that she deals with daily. She struggles with weight too, and like me, she goes through phases when she tries to lose weight only to revert back to what she knows, what she is comfortable with.

Like Mom, Dad takes medication to control his blood pressure and cholesterol, but being overweight never seems to bother him. He has never expressed any interest or desire in changing his habits, and he often shakes his head when Mom and I try to eat better or exercise more. Although he encourages us and praises us when we drop a few pounds, he doesn't act too surprised when we stop focusing on weight and weight loss.

My numbers—cholesterol, blood sugar, blood pressure—are good. They always have been. Everything falls in the middle. I'm just right. Yet I know that some day that luck will run out. I worry about that. Not about the weight itself but the problems that might develop as a result of it. I worry also about medical personnel misdiagnosing me too.

I rarely go to the doctor. When I do, I see a nurse practitioner for my medical needs. I have for years now. I'm usually there because I have a sore throat or because

it's time for a routine checkup. I have my numbers checked regularly—just in case. I've learned to be a skeptical patient, though, especially when the nurse uses a smaller blood pressure cuff to take my blood pressure. I have been in and around the medical field long enough to know that the right cuff provides a more accurate reading. Small cuffs offer higher readings on larger people, just as larger cuffs offer inaccurate readings on smaller folks.

My nurse practitioner's nurse uses the wrong size cuff—unless I bring my own, larger cuff with me for her to use now. Naturally, my blood pressure is higher which causes concern for Alicia, the NP I see. So I try to remember to bring it with me, all the while wondering why Adena Medical Center doesn't have various cuffs on hand to treat their patients who come to them in all shapes, sizes, and conditions.

“Wendi,” Alicia said, “your blood pressure is high.”

“Yeah,” I said. I was annoyed—knowing that my blood pressure wasn't high, that the wrong cuff had been used. When I worked in human resources at the hospital in Oak Hill, I moonlighted sometimes as a nursing assistant and knew how to read blood pressure monitors and knew that this reading was inaccurate. It was one of the first things I learned when I was trained—small cuffs for small people, large cuffs for larger people.

“It was high the last time you were here too.” She said in that not quite motherly tone but in that I'm your medical practitioner you should listen to me kind of way.

“I know,” I said. I didn't want to argue but felt aggravated. *I have an ear ache, I wanted to say, not high blood pressure.*

“I know we’ve talked about the benefits of losing weight, about how that will help stave off problems like this, but it doesn’t seem to be working for whatever reason.”

No, it isn’t. I like to eat, and I hate to exercise. It might make me feel good—the exercise—but I will never, ever, under any circumstances say that I like doing it. Put a gun to my head, but I still won’t say I like it.

I probably shrugged or nodded. I don’t remember. I know I probably agreed just to get out of there.

“I think we need to talk about taking some medication,” she said and produced a prescription pad. “I’m going to write you a script. Take it as directed; once a day and see me in a month. We’ll see how it’s working for you,” she said as she adopted her *I know what’s best for you* tone.

I must have said okay, took the prescription, and left.

I didn’t have it filled. Instead, I took my blood pressure every day for that month and kept a record of it. Not trusting my own ears to read the pressure accurately, I employed other people to check my blood pressure as well. Turned out that we were usually in sync.

When I saw her again for my follow up, I admitted to the nurse that I had never gotten the medicine and explained why. “Will you take my blood pressure using your cuff and then use mine to see how they differ?” I asked her.

She agreed. There was a significant difference; in fact, my blood pressure was within the normal range when she used a larger cuff. And when the nurse practitioner came in and saw my numbers from the previous month and that day, she understood why I hadn’t filled the script. I think she was annoyed, though, that I hadn’t done what she

wanted. Another patient who wasn't compliant. I was afraid that if I took the medicine my blood pressure would drop to dangerously low levels and create an even bigger problem. And I knew that I needed to be an advocate for myself and pay attention—to acceptable/within range numbers and whether or not my size was taken into account when those numbers were being reviewed. I have to take care of myself. First and foremost.

It bothers me when people assume that because I am overweight, extremely overweight at 400+ pounds, that I must be unhealthy. Aside from the weight, I'm not. I often joke that I'm one of the healthiest fat chicks I know. My cholesterol (HDL, the good kind) is better than my friends' who run and watch what they eat. Thanks to television, magazine and newspaper articles, and just about every doctor with whom I have come in contact, I have been programmed to believe that I'm on borrowed time, that eventually it will catch up with me. That I'll find myself with diabetes or high blood pressure—something that will be attributed to my weight.

So why the hell won't I change?

I am comfortable in my own skin, most of the time. I am who I am. A fat chick. A woman who loves traveling, learning new things, making new friends, etc. etc. My size...it's not important in connection to those things. It shouldn't matter. But sometimes it does when I travel or go new places, and I worry that those times when it does matter are only going to increase. Yet I refuse to change.

I do worry about not being me—that I will become someone I don't recognize—not just when I look in the mirror but when I speak or walk down the street. When I have lost weight, been somewhat slimmer, and felt overall better, physically and mentally, I

felt a sense of empowerment. I felt more confident in myself, in my abilities—not that I didn't feel that way before, that I don't feel that way now—but it was *different*. A good different—one that I cannot explain or even understand really.

So why wouldn't I want that again?

I know that I can lose weight—the old fashioned way, without diets or gimmicks. If I keep a food journal, don't deny myself the food (even the bad food) that I want, and exercise a little bit every day, I lose weight. I don't need to eat boiled cabbage three times a day or have gastric bypass surgery. This was a go to solution when I said to my OB/GYN years ago that someday I would like to have children; before he even discussed options that a single woman might have if she wanted children, he wanted to discuss my weight and immediately suggested surgery to *correct* the problem.

I want to wear bright colors, sleeveless dresses, and high heels (at least once, since my feet won't stand for them). I want that confidence to linger, to warm me like an old blanket my Grama made me, and I want to go to restaurants and theatres *without* having my first thought be about the seating. So why won't I allow myself to go there? Do I enjoy this insecurity, this feeling of uneasiness I have sometimes when I'm holding onto the railing as I walk up the stairs? I would like to think that I don't. But maybe I do. Maybe I use my weight as an excuse. I hide behind it.

It's my crutch. It's my security—this fat. I know that it surrounds me, protects me—at least I think it does. Whether I want to admit it or not, I still think about what my dad said from time to time, about his desire for a son. No matter what I do in life, will I ever be good enough? Not for him—he loves me and is proud of me, I know that now. I mean for me. Will I ever be good enough for me? I wonder if I will ever lose weight and

permanently keep it off. If I can, will I open myself up to new, possibly even better experiences? I know that on some level I will always crave that safety. When I over-analyze and think about what it means to be a fat chick, I know that in the end being fat doesn't offer any protection, not really. I still suffer the same hurts, the same frustrations, the same fears that slimmer people have. And I know...that size is relative. It's the other things that matter.

“A Flight of What Ifs”

As the honor society meeting began, Gina said, “The National Honors’ Conference is going to be in San Antonio, Texas this year. Because it’s so far away, only two students can go with Barry and Judy.”

The ease with which Gina used Dr. and Professor Thompson’s first names always baffled me, but then again ever since I had known Gina she had always been on a casual basis with the professors in Wood Hall. No wonder—she was married to one of them. The president of the honor society at the University of Rio Grande, Gina was also a mother to two boys and the wife of the only philosophy professor on campus. Dark eyes set in a bird-like face framed with even blacker hair, she was wafer sliced—trained as a ballerina when she was young, she had a love for the Marquise de Sade and Emily Dickinson.

“In a situation like this, the president and the vice president of the society would go. Fred’s going to go, but because I can’t, I suggested that you go, Wendi,” Gina continued.

I looked up from my notes when she said that. I was the secretary of the honor society, a capacity in which I had served for the last year. Organization was what I was best at. That and note-taking. I did both well.

She must have seen something in my look because she added, “If you want to go.”

Of course, I did. I had never been anywhere west of the Mississippi.

My parents were not travelers. Vacation was a day trip to see relatives in West Virginia or a weekend trip to Aurora, Ohio; Sea World was there when I was a kid. We

didn't take week long trips every year like my classmates who went to the beach with their families. Myrtle Beach was the staple for their spring break but not in the Kozma household, and that was supposed to be fine. But it wasn't, not for me. I was always fascinated with the license plates of passing vehicles and thought about places as far away as Alaska, California, Rhode Island, or New York.

Although I was used to staying home, I wanted to travel; I always had. I had always wanted to visit places far from home. Despite my tendency to be quiet and withdrawn, I had always fancied myself an explorer. I loved safety though, and comfort, so this desire was a mixture of excitement and anxiety about the unknown. Yet I was inquisitive; I loved to learn. What better way to gain knowledge than to travel, walking through history or admiring the deep lines and colors of famous paintings when I visited museums?

So yes, I was ready to go. Ready but anxious. The only connection I had to Texas was my cousins on my dad's side. I had never been there. I wanted to see Texas; I wanted to see everyplace and everything. I wanted to stand in the center of the Alamo and imagine what it must have been like for the men of the Alamo as they faced the Mexican army in one final stand. It must have been their finest (and most frightening) moment—one that had always fascinated me since I had taken American History with Mr. Cayton in the tenth grade. I wanted to join other tourists along the River Walk and explore the length of the San Antonio River. I wanted to go to the museum there, to see the fine lines executed across the canvas by Monet or Botticelli up close. I wanted to do and see so much, and I couldn't wait to get started with this, my first trip.

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I can't remember his name, just the way he looked—a non-traditional student in an army fatigue olive green jacket, with glasses, a moustache and goatee, Hispanic. He came into anthropology class late, sliding into his seat at the conference table with a coolness that suggested he didn't care about the time, despite the look of warning that Professor Thompson gave him. He was late every single time. His name or even his attitude about the course isn't important though. Not then. Not now. What is important is that he mocked my fear, every day for weeks leading up to the San Antonio Honor Students' Conference.

It was 1995, and I was an undergraduate at the University of Rio Grande in Rio Grande, Ohio, and at twenty-one years old, I wouldn't have entertained the idea of standing up for myself. I hated to be called on during class; I preferred to keep my head down, do my work, and only speak when spoken to. I didn't like confrontation of any kind and avoided it as much as I could.

It didn't matter where I was, walking through Wood Hall to class or going across campus. Every time he saw me, like an angry volcano, he would make this noise deep in his belly that erupted from his throat—the sound of a plane accelerating with speed towards the ground and then he would clap his hands together. BOOM! Fragments and flame, death. I thought he was cruel, especially since he knew I had never flown before, and I was scared because it seemed like every time I watched the news another plane had to make an emergency landing or crashed somewhere over the ocean. Wreckage and loved ones not recovered or worse, unrecognizable.

At some point, I must have expressed my fear—a little too loudly. Fear of the unknown heightens my anxiety *until* I'm in the moment, and then I'm fine. I've always

been that way, probably always will be. If it's something I haven't done before, I worry and fret until I'm actually doing it. When I was a senior in high school and tried to donate blood, I couldn't make the Red Cross volunteer understand that the reason my heart rate was elevated was because I had never had blood taken from my arm before and didn't know what to expect. After taking my pulse three times, I was rejected and couldn't give blood. It wasn't until I was older that I was finally able to.

I couldn't ignore my tormentor as much as I tried. He thought he was funny; I just thought he was an ass, but I wouldn't have said that to him then.

That anxiety, that not knowing, though, remains, and even now, I can't shake that feeling most of the time. Having a plan in place, asking questions, and knowing what to (possibly) expect helps, but I never feel fully prepared for what's about to happen even though I make the best efforts to.

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Many years later, I was teaching at Daymar College in Jackson, Ohio when a young woman in one of my English classes said that she had never left Jackson County—that she didn't want to, that she didn't want to find employment in any other county because she had an uncanny fear of getting lost. She was afraid of not knowing where she was; she was afraid of what could happen.

I didn't like getting lost either. In fact, I used to have major meltdowns if I missed my exit. I became anxious and fretful about having to ask someone for directions, arriving at my destination late or worse, not arriving at all.

I never knew how to read a map until I was in college, and that reduced some of my insecurities about experiencing someplace new. Now, getting lost was fun. Sometimes nerve-wracking, fear inducing, but one for the books.

But fear of the unknown makes some people, like my student, stop in their tracks. Makes them immobile. Regretful. I didn't want her to be one of those people. I didn't want her to be like me. I had regrets, things I wished I had done when I was younger—gone away to college instead of staying home, studying abroad. I encouraged her to step out of her comfort zone, to explore new areas, to give it a try. Would she always be afraid to take that first step?

I knew that first step was a precipice, a dark cavernous hole in which she could fall, in which I could fall. And sometimes that fear caused me to back off, to hesitate too. Instead of trying, taking the plunge, I waited. I went towards the edge, leaned over, looked down and felt my heart plummet to my feet. The heat crept into my face, and my pulse did a zigzag waltz through my body, and I froze. I couldn't move, couldn't make a decision. Sometimes, I did nothing and let the regret grow like moss on a fallen tree.

I talked a good talk but didn't always walk the walk, yet I hoped I would someday look back on my life and have little regrets. I hoped there weren't many.

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Because my travel experience was so limited, I was anxious about flying for more than one reason. Not only had I never been on a plane before, but I weighed three hundred pounds. No firsthand knowledge about airplanes and how I would fit in such small spaces was readily available to me. Neither of my parents had been on an airplane before; in fact, the only time any of us had ever been to the airport was in the summer of

1990 when we met my pen pal Vesna who had come all the way from Slovenia to stay the month with me. I didn't remember anything about the airport from that time except that it was big, loud, and confusing in terms of parking, finding the right gate, and connecting with people we were waiting to see.

But there I was, with Dr. and Professor Thompson and Fred, the honor society's vice president, pulling my oversized bag through long term parking and then through the airport. I lagged behind because one of the rolling wheels on the suitcase had broken, and I cursed myself for packing too much, especially when the Thompsons and Fred both had carry-on bags each about the size of a briefcase.

I hauled the clunky, rolling black disaster as quickly as I could until I could check it at the counter and trust all my belongings to a virtual stranger. What if my bag got lost and didn't arrive in San Antonio when I did? What would I do for clothes then? Shouldn't I have packed a carry on just in case? What if I needed a change of underwear? What if my bag never arrived in San Antonio? What if it ended up in Chicago or Philadelphia? What if I had to buy the things I needed when I landed in Texas? What if there no stores there that catered to girls like me, that sold plus size clothes? Did I remember to put my name and home address in my bag? Yes, I thought I did, but did I bother to mention where my destination was so that the official bag finders could send my bag where I actually needed the items it contained? No.

This was (and still is) a major concern for me whenever I fly. I wait eagerly as the bags move along the carousel—always searching for my bag—easily identifiable with a brightly colored luggage band that looks great when it is securely fashioned around my bag but ridiculous when I'm pulling my luggage through an airport or along the street. As

bag after bag moves lazily along the carousel, I am more and more certain that my bag is going to be lost until finally it makes its debut, and then I breathe a sigh of relief. So far, I have been lucky in this respect. But what if it did happen? What would I do then?

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Keeping up with the Thompsons was no easy feat. Anthropologists by trade, they met in graduate school and got engaged two weeks later. Dr. Thompson (Barry) was about six feet-two and took the longest strides known to man whereas his wife Professor Thompson's (Judy) stride matched my own. She was a mere five feet and had difficulty walking alongside him unless he was holding her hand—a Giant towering over Jack (or in this case Judy). Dr. Thompson always walked and ate like he was in a hurry, and it wasn't until I got to know the Thompsons better and in more relaxed social settings that I saw him walk at Judy's pace or linger over a meal.

I pulled my bag behind me, keeping an eye on both of them and Fred, my fellow partners in travel, as we maneuvered the parking lot and then the airport terminal. I did not want to lose sight of them.

At the check in counter, I was questioned about my packing procedures and whether or not I left my bag unattended at any time once I entered the airport. I've never understood the nature of these questions and found them absurd. Would anyone ever tell the airline counter person the truth about such things, especially if said person intended to cause harm?

I don't think so, but then again, the lady at the license bureau asked if I was mentally sound or something like that the last time I had my license renewed. "Do

people ever really say that they aren't?" I asked her as I finished filling out the check I was writing.

"You'd be surprised," she said.

I supposed then if someone was willing to admit that he/she was mentally unstable, then the same person might admit that another individual had packed his/her luggage, but I was not fortunate to have a maid or a significant other to pack my things. I did that all by myself, and I was sure I packed too much given how heavy the bag felt when I had to lift it onto the platform by the airline counter.

I watched as the lady at the airline counter printed tags that said something like "Destination: Texas" and then placed them on the handle of my bag before moving it to a carousel behind her. I watched the bag disappear—bound for San Antonio—at least that was where I hoped it was going, not Boston or Las Vegas. I had the sudden impulse to wave and say, "Goodbye Bag. I will miss you."

Instead, I followed the Thompsons and Fred to security where our boarding passes were examined before we stepped through metal detectors. In 1995, six years before that fatal day in September, security checkpoints were a lot easier to navigate, and we had no concerns about the amount of liquid we had in our carry-ons; we didn't have to remove our shoes, or empty our pockets and purses. There were no body scans, only metal detectors. It was quick, painless.

"We need to go this way," Barry said as he looked at his boarding pass again. He took Judy by the hand and led us down a long, narrow corridor to our left. As we walked what felt like the length of a football field, we arrived at our gate only to wait. Waiting is my Achilles' heel—it's what makes me jittery and nervous. If I can just do something,

whatever it is, without having to anticipate the what ifs, I'm fine. Unfortunately, I am the Princess of the What Ifs, thanks to my mother, the Queen of What Ifs.

My little mama is a worrier. She always has been. I love her, but she worries too much. She worries about what might happen, all of the possibilities of what could go wrong in any given situation. Expect the worst; hope for the best. She worries about the cluttered, lived in look of the house when visitors come unannounced. She even worries about the tags in my clothes sticking up and being seen; she worries about hurting people's feelings when she does something she thinks they won't like, and most of all, she worries about me, her only child, her baby, boarding a plane with people she doesn't know at all, has never met, and leaving Ohio for a long weekend.

And that worry, that ability to think about everything that could go wrong and how I might come across as some dopey, inexperienced traveler was all I could think about while I waited for the boarding process to begin. Why did I care what other people thought? Looking back, I know some people were just like me; they had never flown before and didn't know what to expect either. What did it matter to me if I looked like I didn't know what I was doing?

While we waited, the Thompsons and Fred buried themselves in books. My book was open too, but I couldn't focus on the words in front of me. Instead, I was too busy looking at the electronic sign over the gate (door) where we would board the plane. I kept expecting it to suddenly flash an alternate destination. What if the change wasn't announced over the intercom, and the Thompsons and Fred didn't see it? What if we got on the wrong plane and ended up in California? What if the pilot had been ordered to move the plane to a different gate, and we had to navigate the airport again to find the

right one? What if we had to run through the airport, from one gate to the other? What if we didn't get there on time? What if the plane was delayed and we couldn't make our connection? What would happen then?

The What Ifs were in full swing when I heard the announcements begin. "Now boarding..."

I looked at the Thompsons and Fred, old pros at travel. Among the three of them, they had successfully been to almost all of the United States as well as places like Israel, England, Iran, and Scotland. They were prepared, unlike me. They knew how to travel, knew what to expect. They gathered their belongings and headed towards the airline counter where two women checked everyone's boarding passes. The airline attendants wore deep blue scarves, tied rather uncomfortably around their swan-like necks, and constantly adjusted their standard airline jackets as they ushered passengers through the gate. And into the unknown, for me. I followed my companions and tried to act calm and collected, but inside I felt jittery, like a bowl of jello, like I had had too much caffeine.

I smiled at both of those ladies as I handed the one closer to me my boarding pass. She looked at the pass and then looked at me. "Enjoy your flight."

"Thank you," I said and tried to rearrange my boarding pass, purse, and book into some sort of manageable mess before I stepped through the gate onto the tarmac. Its walls reminded me of the stuff that is used to separate cubicles in a telemarketing office; it felt cool there and it was loud. I heard something rushing, the wind perhaps or planes outside taking off or landing. People passed by me as I walked through what looked like a long, connected hallway. What was their hurry? We all had assigned seats, didn't we?

At that moment, I wasn't sure about anything really except that I was scared. I was leaving my home to take what would, unbeknownst to me, my first of many trips throughout the United States. I would visit other countries too.

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My anxiety maxed out at level 10 when I stepped onto the plane from the tarmac. The flight attendants and pilots greeted us as we stepped through the door of the plane, and immediately, I made eye contact with one of the attendants, a small brunette in that same familiar bright blue uniform. Her smile was as bright as her clothes—it looked flashy but felt genuine, so I smiled back as I made my way into first class.

Why in the hell did I have to go through there? I didn't want to see people stretched out in wide, plush leather seats that boasted plenty of leg room. No, I didn't need to become green with envy as I was reminded that I couldn't afford first class. Fortunately, moving from first class to coach was like having a band-aid removed; it was over quickly and only stung a little.

Wending my way through the long aisle, I referred to my boarding pass again and followed the Thompsons and Fred toward our designated seats. I stepped sideways to best avoid hitting the passengers who were already settled in their small, narrow seats. Some of them leaned towards their seatmates, out of the way, while others had their legs stretched out in the aisles, not worried whether they tripped me or not. Even more still had their seatbelts cinched and were reclining, eyes closed, ready for departure. I couldn't imagine being that calm. Then again, if I had flown before, if this wasn't so new to me, maybe I would be like them, settling in for a long flight, ready to grab some shut eye before touch down.

I was aware of the people behind me, impatient to reach their own seats and get settled in for the flight, so I tried to move quickly as I passed through the aisle. I was more than aware of how awkward I was, being three hundred pounds heavy and inconveniencing other travelers as I maneuvered my way to my seat. For a moment I almost wished I hadn't agreed to go, that I had stayed home where I was safe and comfortable. It was too late; I couldn't ask to be let off the plane so that I could call my parents to come and get me.

I took a deep breath, did my best to say "excuse me" if I bumped someone and reminded myself that I wanted to go to Texas, and I was. To hell with fear; I was in the moment; I was there, doing what I wanted to do, and I had been waiting for this kind of opportunity my whole life. I told myself that my size and my insecurities were not important—doing what I wanted, to travel, was.

Barry and Judy took seats directly across from me and Fred. He had the window seat, and I was wedged in the seat next to him. When I sat down, I wasn't able to reach the seatbelt, and I had struggled to get it out from under me. This only made my nervousness worse. I wanted to get that seat belt out and fastened; however, it did not fit. It would not fit. Not even with the buckle pulled all the way to the end of the belt. I needed about two more inches, just a little wiggle room.

When that same brunette flight attendant walked by me, I said, "Can I have a seat belt extension?"

She nodded and said, "Absolutely."

However, she did not bring the extension immediately, and I worried that she might have forgotten. What if the plane took off and my seatbelt wasn't fastened? What if she didn't have any more besides the one she needed for the inflight emergency preparedness lecture? My hands grew clammy like a fish's gills as I fumbled for the metal bracket and waited.

Just when I was convinced she had forgotten and was ready to ask another flight attendant for an extension, she walked by and handed it to me without saying a word. She smiled, and in one fluid movement, subtle and completely without ceremony, she passed me the addition and kept moving.

I mumbled, "Thank you," and snapped it into the seat belt before securing it around me. Did she know that I was nervous, and embarrassed about my size, when I asked for the extension? Did she recognize a twenty-one-year-old who was insecure and unsure of herself? Did she hear that red filled emotion in my voice bleeding through, a Sharpie on paper? I was not comfortable in my own skin when I was twenty-one because I wasn't sure who Wendi really was. I was a kid then, scared because I was flying for the first time and completely self-conscious about my size as I settled into my seat. I had yet to embrace myself for who I was, who I am. I was just learning to let myself take center stage.

When the pilot's voice boomed on the intercom, I straightened up and paid attention. He thanked us for flying with the airline, reminded us how long it would take to reach Texas and then told us that we would be taking off shortly. Then, he started the engines—a loud, roaring noise came barreling in behind me, filling my ears with a loud hum and then moving forward until it reached the plane's nose. The plane began to

slowly move towards the runway. We bounced and jostled along; it reminded me of hitting speed bumps in a car. Not frightening, just aggravating. Some passengers chatted animatedly and looked out the windows while others opened books and began to read. Others kept their eyes closed, ignoring the announcement overhead to put their seats in upright positions during take-off. What did I do? I listened as the flight attendants, one to my left and one to my right, ahead of me in the aisles, began to explain what to do in case of an emergency.

I located my nearest exit, found directions for what to do in case of a water landing in the seat pocket directly in front of me, and learned that if I had to put on an oxygen mask that I should always put my mask on first, then assist the person sitting next to me if necessary. But what baffled me the most about these safety procedures was that no one paid any attention to the flight attendants' message except me. Even now, when I travel, no one seems interested in learning what to do in case of an emergency; they're all focused inward and counting down the hours until they touch ground. As for me, I still pay attention. I want to know what to do; after all, what if the plane did crash or have to make an emergency landing? What if I didn't know what to do or where my nearest exit was located? What if I did not know what to do? Then what would I do?

The plane gained speed as it taxied down the runway, and again, we were reminded that our seats should be in an upright position, that our seatbelts should be fastened. I double checked mine, secure. I looked past Fred's shoulder and watched as the ground began to blur into a sea of gray asphalt, and then, just like that, the plane was lifting. The land beneath it moved further and further away.

My stomach didn't roll or do somersaults like I feared it might, but as the plane gained altitude, I could feel each turn or adjustment of the wings or at least I thought I could. My head felt slightly heavy as though I had been laughing too hard and had forgotten to breathe (a bad habit of mine when I'm really tickled). I felt off balance but not enough to make me light headed or queasy but just enough to notice.

Eventually, the plane leveled out and so did my anxiety. The tightness in my shoulders let go, and I finally opened my book and settled in like the passengers around me. Occasionally gazing out the window, I was amazed by the billowy white clouds that were above and below the aircraft. It was like being in another world—a winter wonderland of sorts, all soft and snowy. A dreamscape almost, until the pilot's voice jolted me back to reality. From time to time, he gave us small tidbits of information that bothered me. I did not want to know our altitude or how long it would take to get from Point A to Point B. I didn't need to know that. I could do the math, but it wasn't too difficult to figure out that we were up really high in the air and that we were going really fast. What if he never provided us with that knowledge? We could figure it out for ourselves, if we wanted, or we could just enjoy the flight.

Eventually he said that we would begin our descent and arrive in Fort Worth soon, where, if we were continuing our travels, we would meet our connections at this or that gate.

The descent was much like the climb. I felt off balance, like I was battling an ear infection that I couldn't quite shake, but again, I didn't feel nauseated. I felt calm, and I watched as the downy clouds were replaced with countryside, neatly measured out in various proportions. And gradually, I could see cars on the highway; people going about

their day to day business, unaware of the plane above them. The landscape rose up to meet us as the airport came into view.

The plane slowed as it touched ground; the landing gear expertly dropped. The maneuver was executed with such precision that I barely felt the lurch forward as the pilot continued to apply the brakes. Instead, I tucked away my book and looked out the window once again...ready to experience all that San Antonio had to offer.

“Have Shoes, Will Travel”

I love completely irresponsible shoes—the kind of shoes that are in *Vogue* magazine; the kind that make me compliment friends, colleagues, and strangers alike when I encounter them. Sling backs, open toed and high heeled, in bright and sassy pinks or reds that elongate the legs and accentuate the frame. These are the kinds of shoes I love to look at.

But they are the kind of shoes I can't wear. Ever. I'm resigned to wearing comfortable shoes that work with my feet and not against them. I learned early on that I couldn't dash outside to the mailbox barefooted because I felt as though glass shards were being driven into my soles. I'd hobble across the driveway and back wincing in pain. I envied the girls who wore flip flops because I couldn't. The plastic between my big and second toes rubbed my flesh raw with each step I took. Socks offered some relief, but my feet were temperamental and didn't want to cooperate. Thus began my long and often sad journey regarding my feet and the shoes that encase them. My mom, my family physician, no one could offer any explanation why I had so much trouble, except to say that I had sensitive feet.

I can always find shoes that I like, love even, but I always choose comfortable walking shoes because they seem to do the best job. Not trendy ones—just plain, black New Balance sneakers, wide enough to encase my feet and just ugly enough to embarrass me but comfortable enough that I wear them no matter what the occasion.

I don't intentionally select shoes that scream, “Look at me!” anyway because I would prefer to blend in and be one of the masses. My own insecurities about my

appearance size made me feel as though I already stood out because I am (and always have been) a fat chick.

And as a fat chick, I can't help but feel that I draw attention to myself in a world that isn't always accommodating to larger people. Yet I want to experience that world, every damn bit of it, and I don't want to be restricted for any reason, not because of my size or because my shoes and feet can't get along. Not because of anything. So when I have the opportunity now to travel, I do. I want to see and experience everything, sights, sounds, and people.

When my book group friends and I decided to go to London in May of 2010, I knew that I had to get my feet (and the rest of me) in shape. I had been visited there once before in 1998 and knew that London was a "walking city" which meant I had to be ready. The recommendation from friends and my doctor was to lose weight and walk, walk, walk in order to toughen up, so that's what I did. It wasn't easy.

I began by changing some of my habits. I drank a large McDonald's coke almost every day, so I cut that out and drank more water instead. Instead of eating out a lot, I cooked more at home and thought about my portions, and I walked or did some form of exercise almost every day. That was probably the hardest part for me because I hated to exercise. Exercise is not something I will ever enjoy; I enjoy the benefits of it and know that it is good for me, but like it? No. Absolutely not. Not ever. Exercise is like cleaning the house—get me started and I'm fine. But it's the getting started part that I have the most trouble with. To keep me motivated, I even obtained a personal trainer, and as a result, my weight slowly started to drop. Things began to shrink. My feet, for one! Who would think that feet get smaller? Bums, yeah, but feet? As a result, my

shoes didn't properly fit, so my feet protested with blisters on my toes and heels... at least for a little while.

But then almost a year passed, and I was almost one hundred pounds lighter and more than ready for our adventure across the pond. I wasn't so worried about my feet anymore—despite their earlier warnings—but more so about the travel experience itself. I had never had to purchase an additional seat before, but would I be required to? Despite the weight loss, I was larger than I had been the last time I traveled on a plane. What annoyed me most about airline travel was that in order to be completely comfortable, I only needed about two more inches of space, not an additional twenty-two. But I knew that plenty of people were being forced (or even bullied) into buying second seats to ensure their comfort as well as those around them. Just the thought of being told that I needed to buy two seats because I wouldn't fit in one horrified me. I was already aware of my size. I didn't need an airport attendant or a two seat requirement to remind me.

I couldn't imagine the embarrassment, no, the humiliation I would feel if that happened. It overwhelmed me so much that I anticipated this sort of scenario and played it out in my mind until I found myself measuring movie theatre and playhouse seats to see how wide they were and whether or not I could sit in them comfortably without bothering the person next to me. When I worried about something, I thought about it too much. I dwelled on what might or might not happen. My instinct was to anticipate the worst but hope for the best. Fat chicks, or anyone for that matter, don't want to crowd other people. We don't want to be any more uncomfortable than the next person.

So I scanned my airline's website and looked at policies about disabilities and persons of size in terms of seating and concluded that the website wasn't any more

helpful than measuring theatre seats. The policy stated that the purchaser had to fit *comfortably* in the seat. What the hell did that mean? Who decided if I was comfortable or not? And how would those in power decide if I could manage to fit into a twenty-two inch space? Would they measure me? I imagined a woman stepping from behind the airline counter, a tape measure held in front of her like a weapon, saying, “Would you just step over here?” It wasn’t like there were airline seats in the terminal for me try out before I got onto the plane. I thought that if this was such an issue now, like the size of carry-on bags, why wasn’t there a plane seat near the counter? A judgment based on my appearance alone would be made and nothing else. A judgment I didn’t feel was fair. Would they require the same thing for a bodybuilder or someone who was big boned?

Despite my anxiety about all this, my desire to go to London superseded the fact that I might have to buy an extra seat. I would even though I wouldn’t want to spend the extra money because even though I didn’t like to admit it I was still the kind of woman who preferred to not make a scene rather than stand up for myself. Sometimes, anyway. I would rather spend my extra money some other way though—tea at the Ritz or a train ticket to visit Jane Austen’s home in Chawton.

Unfortunately, there was to be no May holiday for me. London had to wait because the airline my friend Beth and I used canceled our flight thanks to Iceland’s volcanic ash cloud looming over Europe. Our other friends, however, used a different airline (in a different state) that hesitated to cancel their flight, and sure enough, the cloud lifted just as they landed at Heathrow while Beth and I had to postpone our adventure until after Christmas—just like we did in ’98, we decided to welcome in the new year in London.

Anxieties, having never fully gone away then, grew until I found myself continuously dwelling on the what ifs of the situation. I'm compulsive that way. I can't let things go. So...on the day of the flights, then, I prepared myself for the worst case scenario and what I would do if I was confronted with an airline attendant who insisted that I purchase two seats.

After I talked to my trainer about my concerns, she suggested that I take special care with my appearance—to be self assured, confident—and then no one would think about making me buy a second seat. “Be yourself,” she said. “Go in there and act like you belong. Act like you own the place.” So that's what I did.

I chose my travel outfit carefully. I selected (slimming) black slacks, a pink and black blouse with a pullover black sweater and (ever responsible) black walking shoes and wore very little jewelry—small diamond earrings and a necklace my parents had given me years ago for Christmas. I also reminded myself that no one could make me feel inadequate or unsure of myself but me. Admittedly, I was an expert at that, but I embraced my worries and told myself that I knew who I was—a spunky, cute, well dressed woman who didn't need to buy two seats. Whatever was going to happen would, but I would be fine. I'd get to London and have a great time. That was all I wanted.

So on the morning of the flights, I lugged my bag through the airport and remembered why I hated packing (Big gal + larger clothes = heavy bag) but more importantly how I was going to have the time of my life on this trip. Familiar anxiety though pushed its way through my cool exterior—just a little—when I checked my luggage at the airport counter. Although I had gotten my boarding pass via a kiosk and didn't obtain it from an airline representative, I imagined that when I checked my bag the

representative would say, “Excuse me, Miss, but you can’t fly with us unless you make an additional purchase,” or something might be said to me even later when I got ready to board the plane, but to my relief, nothing happened. No one said anything to me about my size, an extra seat—nothing. To my great relief, I was treated like any other passenger.

You would think that I would begin to relax after checking my luggage and going through security, but no. I had to maneuver my way through the airplane itself to find my seat without bumping into other passengers, not easy for anyone of any size who flew coach. I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone, so making someone wait while I found my seat unnerved me a little bit too. (This is why parallel parking on a crowded street is also a problem for me.) Then, I had to ask for a seatbelt extension from the flight attendant and think about what would happen when it came time to deal with breakfast and dinner trays. I can’t use the drop down tray because I don’t have enough room between me and the seat in front of me. As a fat chick, I’m always thinking about what might potentially happen or how I might manage a situation and not feel too awkward or draw too much attention to myself.

After I was given a complimentary blanket and pillow for the flight, I employed my would-be ballerina and ninja skills to artfully balance my meal tray on my makeshift table (my tummy, the pillow and blanket balled up and on my lap). It was awkward, but I still managed to eat my dinner without spilling everything. As I ate, though, I couldn’t help but think that if I just had two more inches in front of me—not on either side of me this time—, this wouldn’t be a big deal. But it was something I had done before when I flew, so I was prepared. I adapted. I made the best out of the situation and tried to play

down my awkwardness or that I was being judged by other people on the flight. I knew it was egocentric of me to think that all my fellow passengers had to do was observe me and my balancing act, that it was more than unlikely because they had more to concern themselves with, but I still felt that uncomfortableness punch me in the gut and cause my face to flush.

When I fly, I always choose a window seat because I know that I will be out of the way and won't bother the person next to me. And it helps to sit next to someone I know—like Beth—who agrees to leave the arm rest up between us to provide a little wiggle room and to let me borrow a corner of her table from time to time for my drinks.

It's only when I sit next to a stranger that problems can arise. Years ago, I flew to Baltimore and sat next to "Newspaper Guy." He was an older gentleman, an important businessman, no doubt, in his suit and tie. I climbed over him, because he refused to step out into the aisle to let me in, and wedged myself between him and a small Asian woman who was my other traveling companion that day. He stretched his paper back out, clearly annoyed that I had invaded his space. I tried unsuccessfully to pull myself into my seat so that he could hold his paper at arms' length—both sections spread wide, but this didn't satisfy him.

Within minutes of take-off, he folded his paper, glanced behind and around him, and unbuckled his seatbelt. When he stood up, he announced that he was going to move to the back so that we would both "have enough room." At the time, I worried that my size offended him, that I was so repulsive that he couldn't sit beside me. Now, I like to think that he recognized I was trying to stay out of his way and that he really did want both of us to be comfortable.

But I've learned some survival tips like sit next to the window so that my neighbor can have easy access to the aisle or overhead bin and can come and go as he/she pleases—without having to climb over me. I still curl in on myself, like a cat ready for a nap in the afternoon sun, and try to make myself as small as possible so that I'm not over the arm rest that separates us, and I try to be as friendly and as out of the way as I can because I want my fellow passenger to feel that he does have enough room and that I'm not invading his space.

Once we were over the Atlantic and had dinner, we could watch films, listen to music, or do any number of things. But because I needed all the space I was given, I couldn't use the controls on the inside of the armrest to adjust the volume or plug in headphones. That was no big deal for me. I was usually not interested in what was playing. I preferred to read or try to sleep on long flights, anyway. Sleeping against the window in December, though, was not pleasant. At 30,000 feet in the air, it was so cold outside that the plane's interior walls were cold too. The entire left side of my body was freezing despite the blanket I was under, and I couldn't really get warm enough to actually sleep. Never mind that I had very little room between me and the seat in front of me—why, oh why, do people insist on reclining their seats? I kept shifting back and forth, trying to stretch my legs out and get situated, but the engines were so loud that I couldn't relax anyway. I felt like I was in a vacuum cleaner, but I was lucky enough to find sleep when I could.

Despite my troubled sleep, I arrived at London-Heathrow with Beth the next morning. We collected our bags and set out for the Elysee Hotel where we would be staying for the next several days. It was a cold, dismal morning with a mixture of light

rain and snow falling. The streets were quiet and very few people passed us as we searched block after block.

I was getting wet and more miserable by the minute and lugging that blasted bag around didn't improve my disposition. It only served to remind me that I was still wet and still miserable, and that bag felt heavier by the minute.

I've decided that when I'm rich I'm going to travel with the smallest carry-on bag available and buy clothes once I reach my destination. I'll discard them all as the days pass until all I have is that carry-on bag and the clothes I was wearing to begin with. Anything would be better than hauling a bag through the streets of London or anywhere for that matter as I searched for my hotel. I was cold, tired, and hungry, and I just wanted to get there and put that damn bag down. At least I had a bag, though. One of my biggest fears about airline travel is that my bag will go missing and I won't have anything to wear. Plus size clothing stores could be difficult to find, depending on my destination.

When Beth and I stopped to regroup and consult the map, an English woman saw us and said, "Can I help?" Obviously, we were confused. Bags + maps and pointing down one street and then another = lost tourists. When we told her that we were searching for the Elysee on Craven Terrace, she chuckled in a high pitched sort of way and said, "You need to go back the way you came. You've come too far and need to go the other way, dears." So we thanked her and set off again. Beth, as always, took point, because she has been to London more times that I could count, and I followed dutifully behind cursing to myself that I hated luggage, especially when the wheels didn't cooperate with the sidewalk.

Because of the wrong turns, the walk from Paddington Station to our hotel was long, but at last we arrived at the Elysee and checked in. At most hotels in England, and later I learned, in Ireland, the first floor was really the second because the first floor was what was known as the ground floor or lobby, and all the rooms were located on the floors above that. Usually, the hotels were old houses that had been converted which means there usually wasn't an elevator—only stairs for weary travelers.

The Elysee was no exception. It was efficient—not plush or overly extravagant—and provided us with single (not twin) beds and a teeny, tiny bathroom that was almost manageable for a gal like me. I felt like the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*; although instead of Jack exploring my world, I had climbed down the beanstalk and was immersed in his. Fortunately for me, though, I could actually step into this bathroom, close the door, and turn around without having to straddle the toilet first. In 1998 the bathroom in our hotel was literally a closet that had been converted into a bathroom; it was a true water closet, complete with a sink, toilet, and shower. It definitely required some maneuvering on my part.

We unpacked, telephoned loved ones in Ohio, and then hit the ground running. Well, not literally. I don't run. I am not, nor will I ever be, a runner. I admire those folks but don't ever see myself engaged in that particular activity. I don't know if I'd run from a serial killer. It's too much work. But like any good tourists, we made plans and ventured out into the heart of the city.

London was loud, so loud that I couldn't hear Beth when she tried to talk to me. She had to repeat herself over and over, and I felt bad having to ask her to “say that again” all the time. And the people. I was being hit (literally) as I walked down the

street. London's inhabitants seemed eager almost to have head on collisions with me and Beth. People with bags and strollers were the worst. Seriously, people with strollers were the biggest bullies on crowded streets—they just pushed their way through the throngs of people unconcerned about whether or not they broke someone's leg or trampled on toes. And the many languages I heard and recognized—French, Indian, English (American and British), Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Farsi, Arabic—further illustrated that I was in a cosmopolitan city, much different from my home in the Ohio countryside.

We walked and walked, stopping occasionally in Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, and Charing Cross, before arriving in Leister Square. London was still dressed for Christmas—a rainbow of lights stretched from one side of the street to the other, cheerful and energetic like the people below them. The city would keep its decorations through the new year, and those bright lights greeted us no matter where we were.

By the time we returned to the Elysee after that first day, though, my feet were not happy at all and hurt a lot; my big left toe was bruised a shiny purple—like it had been in a boxing tournament and lost—and felt really sore, but I brushed it off. I didn't say anything to Beth but instead took some Aleve and concluded that resting my feet overnight would restore them to good health. I would be ready for the next day's adventure. I was in London, England after all!

I told myself I would d be fine with whatever came my way while I was there, and I could manage anything. I wasn't always comfortable with my surroundings because everything seemed so damn small in Europe, but I successfully maneuvered my way through doorways that were so tall and narrow that I had to step through sideways

because I was too big to fit. No big deal but annoying as hell, especially when other residents at the hotel stared at me with bemused expressions. And I dealt with my feet.

Each morning, at first anyway, my feet would be improved from the previous day. Better but tender to the touch. I self medicated with Aleve and inspected my toes—still bruised and sensitive, especially around the cuticles which were turning white and spongy. That elasticity in my skin worried me, and I was afraid I would lose my toenails. I didn't want that to happen—not while I was abroad, not at all really. When I returned home, some ten days later, though, I actually lost four, but at least that happened *after* my holiday. I wore house slippers to work for at least a week.

But London is a city designed for walking; it's the best way to experience the city, and I spent a lot of time walking, usually behind Beth. I'm a short, fat chick with a small stride, even if I am walking at a brisk pace. I was sure Beth felt like a tour guide most of the time—that or like she had a stalker since I spent most of my time following her. But we had to walk everywhere. Even if we wanted to use the metro, we had to navigate stairs or escalators (that sometimes weren't working properly) to reach the platforms, and then we'd have to walk out of the station to reach the street. We walked the length of the Thames, over the Millennium Bridge, through museums, and Hyde Park. Everywhere.

And by this time, my feet had decided that they didn't like all the walking and they didn't like the shoes I was wearing, so they refused to cooperate. They were waging a coup against what I thought were good shoes, and my shoes were losing battle after battle. And it was a long war—not as long as the Hundred Years' War—but ten days felt like one hundred years when each step I took caused me to wince, and all I could do was

focus on where I had to go next, how long it would take to get there, and when I could sit down and put up my feet.

By New Year's Eve, I had blisters about the size of mini pancakes on my heels, the pads of feet, and on my toes—in particular, on the cuticles. Each time my foot connected with the pavement, the skin sloshed back and forth like water in a pail and intensified the pain. By then I had become more than familiar with pharmacies in London, but I still worried endlessly about open wounds on my feet and the possibility of infection. I tended to my feet daily, covered them with band aids and ointment, doubled my socks, already bloodied and distressed looking, and searched out every bench or seating area I could. I didn't know what was worse though: sitting down to rest my feet or getting back up again.

But on that last day in December (just as we did in '98), we stood on Westminster Bridge for a long while and enjoyed the view: the London Eye moved in its lazy, circular motion. The Thames swirled beneath us while Big Ben announced the hour with each chime. Buildings silhouetted against the cold, black sky. Loud, raucous people were everywhere while policemen searched every inch of the bridge making sure it was secure for the 250,000+ revelers, and once again, I tried to look less like a distressed tourist and more like someone who belonged there.

We didn't remain on the bridge to see the end of year fireworks; instead, we watched them on television after a lovely dinner at Chimes, a local pub we stumbled upon the first time we visited London all those years ago. And then just like that—it was 2011. The new year was quietly but painfully welcomed from the Elysee.

We departed London via train (and later a ship, the *Ulysses*) on the morning of January 2. While I was in Europe, that pain never left me, and I often found it hard to enjoy myself. Even Beth, once she knew the sad condition my feet were in, worried about how I felt and if I was having a good time. All I wanted to do was take my bloodied and sorry feet home. I should have taken better care of myself that first day, but I don't think it would have mattered. My feet were beyond saving. Although I didn't know it at the time, hindsight is 20/20, the rebellion against my *responsible* shoes was already underway before I even left America, and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

“Bucket List Blues”

I created my *working* bucket list the year I lived in Lake Pleasant, Massachusetts with a close friend of mine and her husband. She was working on a second master’s degree in biology, and he was studying library science. I don’t know why I agreed to go with them, except that I had never lived anywhere else except Oak Hill, Ohio. In the same house, all my life. Massachusetts was fourteen hours away from home, away from my friends, away from the only life I had known, and eventually, I found my way back. And with me, I brought my bucket list.

I suppose it was created out of some silly need to write down everything I wanted to do. I have always been fond of making lists; I’m a bit obsessive-compulsive that way. I decided that I needed to write down everything I wanted to do—no matter how silly, no matter how serious. Somehow I thought that if I saw it in writing and looked at it often enough I could accomplish everything I wanted.

Over the years, I have crossed some of those items off. As I draw a line through one, I add two more to my list. Perhaps it is because like most people I find myself constantly *wanting*. Maybe that yearning never leaves; it only grows and deepens until it becomes a never ending craving we have, that we cannot satisfy no matter how many times we try.

I have many, many items on my list. Seeing the same movie twice in one day was one that I have crossed out (only to do it again later when the fancy struck me). Traveling outside of the United States on more than one occasion was another, and because I enjoy traveling so much, I haven’t really marked that one out. There is always some place I want go, some place I still want to see—the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the Pyramids in Egypt.

My list keeps growing; it will never diminish. Will I ever be truly satisfied, or will I continually ask myself if this (whatever *this* is) is good enough? Part of me thinks that if I do not

have something to work towards, to have that desire, that want, I will give up. I will become mediocre, stale. Bland. I cross things off my list, but the obsessive-compulsive me continues to add to it as well.

In a writing class I teach now, I often ask students to create bucket lists. Some of them don't know what I mean until I say, "You know...it's what you want to do before you kick the bucket." They find the idea morbid. No matter what age they are, students don't want to think about getting old, about dying. I think it's more than that. I think they don't want to think about what they *haven't* done. They do not want to express their desires out loud or commit them to paper. Somehow their dreams seem more out of reach if they are written down for the rest of us to see. I explain that a bucket list shouldn't be viewed as a list of things they haven't done but as things they want to do and will someday. A list of goals. To them, though, it is just admitting failure; they should have done some of these things a long time ago. If only they hadn't gotten married so young, they could have traveled more. If only they had gone to college sooner, they would be in careers now that would allow them to go skydiving or swim with dolphins.

What baffles me about these students is not their resistance to making the list but rather the lists themselves. They tend to be very short. Some of the students only list two or three items. I tell them that the list can be as serious as it is frivolous. Is that all they want to do? Really? Surely there is more. I tell myself that they aren't comfortable committing to the page. I do not require they share their lists with me but ask if they will offer up at least one item, one thing they want to do and share it with the rest of the class.

I know we are all different, that we all have different ideas in mind about what we want to do in our lives, but surely they want more than that. Then I chastise myself for thinking that they are limiting themselves. Perhaps that is all they want in life; if they are okay with three

items on their list, why should it bother me? Am I jealous that they are so sure, so confident, so happy that they don't need to list a dozen or more things? I don't want people to be that satisfied with their lives or maybe I just wish I was more satisfied with mine.

I first mentioned my bucket list to my friends Ellen, Kara, and Cheryl when we went to Myrtle Beach together where we would soak the piña colada sunshine and forget our responsibilities in Ohio, at least for a little while. Each of us left something or someone behind because each of us needed this time, this change of scenery. We needed to recharge, relax, and regroup because we had to be prepared for the onslaught of responsibilities that would be waiting for us at home and at work.

I knew I needed a break, or I would crack, an egg broken on the sidewalk. I was tired. At the time, I had not only been working at the University of Rio Grande in Rio Grande, Ohio for almost a year as the secretary in the Madog Center for Welsh Studies, but I was teaching English at Southeastern Business College in Jackson as well. Two jobs—and I was being pulled in two different directions. Some days I found myself driving to Rio Grande only to realize that I needed to be in Jackson first, and I could not blame listening to NPR on the drive. I simply did not know which way I was supposed to go. I was sleep deprived from grading student essays and irritated at the sound of my own voice saying, “Madog Center for Welsh Studies. This is Wendi,” in both Welsh and English day in and day out. I knew I was losing my mind when I started answering my home phone in that familiar work greeting.

So I was more than eager to take a vacation...and I was eager to see the beach again. I agree with those who say that we must return to the sea from time to time—or to any body of water, really—to get grounded. I have not been to the seaside very often; in fact, I had never seen the ocean firsthand until I was twenty-one years old. I was pleased to go again...to lather

on sunscreen, sit in the sand, read a good book, and listen to the waves make their way to the shore.

I had met Ellen in Dr. Brown's Composition II course when I was an undergraduate at the University of Rio Grande. Older than I am by twenty-plus years, Ellen was perhaps one of the most interesting friends I made. Of Irish descent, she was all angles—high cheekbones, a sharp, intelligent nose, and a tall, slender frame that carried fashion well; she was one of those women who looked very “put together” but casual and comfortable at the same time. She was married to an oil man. Odd, it never occurred to me that Ohio could offer up oil to be bought and sold for a hefty price, yet it did, and Ellen and her husband profited from that gift.

She was pursuing a degree in history, having left the business world behind. She had worked for Dave Thomas (of the Wendy's franchise) before owning her own business. “But I love history,” she said. And she loved humor too. The license plate on her BMW read *Irish B*. I thought at first that the *B* stood for her last name: Brasel, but she explained: “The *B* stands for *Bitch*.” Pride was in her voice, and humor was on her lips as she waited for my reaction.

I stared at her. In fact, I'm sure I gaped. Why would any woman refer to herself as a bitch? I had no idea, but then I saw that she, like so many other women I would come to know, had learned to own that term and many others that have so often been deemed derogatory towards women. She had molded that word into a dough of her own making and wore it the way a man might wear a medal—with honor. For her, the phrase *Irish B* represented what she was: a strong-willed, independent, determined woman.

And for me, she had become someone whom I wanted to emulate. She still is.

When I moved back to Ohio from Massachusetts in 2001, I did what any gal with an English degree and previous experience in human resources would do: I applied for clerical and

teaching positions, and eventually, I landed part-time jobs doing both. Teaching at Southeastern Business College was easy compared to working for Kara in the Madog Center for Welsh Studies.

Kara was the Director of the Madog Center; she was a small, short brunette with big set eyes and a wide smile. She often reminded herself and me that I did not speak Welsh at all let alone fluently like she did, and when I would look at her, dumbfounded, not knowing what to say because she had spoken to me in a rush of foreign words, she would shake her head and immediately switch to English. I am always impressed by people who are bi- or multi-lingual. I could never hold two languages in my head at one time and switch between the two as easily as a racecar driver moves between lanes.

What always amazed me about Kara was her ability to get people to do things. I'm sure she could convince a man selling water that he was thirsty; she was that good. Seriously, she had to have been a door to door vacuum salesperson in a former life, a very successful one. I don't know how she did it, but she could sweet talk everyone from the president of the college down to the patrons who supported the Madog Center into giving her what she wanted or needed to keep it afloat.

I wish I possessed that quality. I have this tendency to look guilty when I ask someone to do something; I feel bad putting someone out and don't have a lot of conviction when I ask, so it's easy to tell me no, and I end up doing it myself. Of course, I think I lack conviction simply because part of me whether I want to admit or not thinks that the only way the job will get done properly is if I do it myself. I only half-heartedly ask because I want to be told no. If I do it myself, I'm the only one to blame if it doesn't turn out the way I think it should. This is why

group work is always difficult for me. It is hard for me to trust other people to do things the way I think they need to be done. I have issues with control or lack thereof, apparently.

Before our trip to Myrtle Beach that May, I did not know Cheryl very well. In fact, I did not really know her at all until Ellen and Kara introduced me to her. Like the rest of us, she was employed at the University of Rio Grande. And like me, she was a part-time employee. She was an adjunct English professor. Not only did she teach at Rio, but she taught other places as well, so the two of us immediately bonded over having more than one job and lamenting the fact that we did not have health insurance and other benefits and most days did not know if we were coming or going to the right place.

Cheryl lived in a large, two story house just outside of Crown City on Route 7 and was married at the time to a man named Gil. She had one daughter from a previous marriage. She loved Dylan Thomas and had earned her master's degree at Marshall University. She had the smallest feet of any woman I knew—a size five, and because her feet were so small, Cheryl would buy shoes upon shoes when she found them in her size. Just like Ellen and Kara did. I loved looking at shoes but rarely bought anything fashionable. Tennis shoes, sneakers, trainers (Kara called them) were what I wore day in and day out, but I had no trouble admiring their plethora of shoes and secretly wishing my own feet could withstand such footwear.

And so there we were, the four of us brought together by friendship and work, and before us was the open road.

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“If it's on the way, just wave because we aren't stopping,” Ellen said as we left Rio Grande. And she was serious. Her plan was to reach Myrtle Beach as soon as possible, leaving little time to linger over gas and restroom breaks. Her idea was that we would fill up the car and

use the restroom then, all in one stop. Much to Kara and Cheryl's dismay, she did not want to stop multiple times, and she was not interested in any side trips to places like White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. I understood her purpose—just get there and then relax, but I did not want to be trapped in a car for long periods of time either. I wanted a chance to stretch my legs now and then.

But Kara and Cheryl wanted to stop every time we saw a brown road sign indicating a historical site or some point of interest, and because they both claimed they had bladders the size of peas, they were not thrilled with this plan. Sitting in the back seat of Ellen's SUV, they devised their own plan: they would each take turns asking Ellen to stop, and that way she did not get too angry at either one of them.

She did not get angry. Annoyed maybe, but not all out pissed; in fact, she stopped every time they asked to go to the restroom even though they eventually started referencing her reign as car commander to a certain regime ruled by a man with a very short, black mustache. I silently agreed that perhaps she was a bit dictator-like, especially when she announced the lack of stops we would be making, and although I joked with Kara and Cheryl about Ellen's lack of sensitivity to their needs, I did not really take to calling her a Nazi or Hitler, for that matter. I was sitting up front with her after all.

Instead, I voiced my thoughts when we came home and decided that the three of us should present Ellen with a "thank you" gift for everything she did for us while we were on vacation, including not letting us stop as often as we wanted. Logging on to my Barnes and Noble account, I ordered a copy of *Mein Kampf*, and then using a photograph I took of Ellen as we were driving down the road, I covered Hitler's portrait on the front and then proceeded to

paste quotes all over the cover (front and back) of things that she said about travel and our adventures—quotes that seemed very dictator-like.

When she unwrapped the book, covered with some flowery print paper and hidden by a slush pile of bright tissue paper in a gift bag of the same color, she laughed. Being a history teacher and having a strong interest in World War Two, she was interested in understanding more about Hitler and his writings, and *Mein Kampf* would help her in that endeavor. She was not at all offended, and even now, she laughs when she reads the quotes we blasted all over the cover.

I still sometimes think it was an inappropriate gift on so many levels—to compare her to Hitler was more than extreme; to give her a copy of Hitler's book and then to suggest she was in fact not *like* Hitler but was *a Hitler*, but she knows my humor. Friends of mine who study the war and who focus on the atrocities committed at Auschwitz and Triblenka find it appalling that people compare other people to Hitler or to Nazis in every day, normal conversations. I have been called a Grammar Nazi on many occasions and did not think much of it until I talked to some of these students of history and looked at it from their perspective. So...it was probably wrong for many reasons, but Ellen, being Ellen, laughed and did not seem at all offended. She still has it to this day although I'm inclined to think that she removed her own picture and the quotes that accompanied it.

I mentioned my bucket list when the four of us stopped at McDonald's for lunch. It was the only time we would eat fast food on that trip, and it was the first time—but not the last time—I translated Kara's order from Welsh to English even though I had no idea what she was saying to me, and the only responses I could make were phrases I had learned in the time I had

been working at the Madog Center. Things like *good morning; how are you; I like coffee; Merry Christmas.*

“What’s on your list?” Kara asked as she sat back in the seat. We were on the road again.

“Yeah,” Cheryl said. “What’s on it?”

So as I read it to them, I offered side notes to accompany each item. “Go to the very top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris and dance,” I said. “My philosophy has always been that I don’t dance in public, but I would make an exception then. I love *Highlander* [the television series, not the films], and when Duncan and Amanda danced at the top of the Eiffel Tower, I knew I wanted to do that too.” It was silly and romantic, and I didn’t care. I loved the idea.

“Tell us about another one,” Ellen said, never taking her eyes off the road.

I think she hoped that distracting Kara and Cheryl with my list would mean that they would not want to stop again anytime soon. *Wishful thinking on her part*, I thought, as I paused to wave at a historical marker since we were not allowed to stop—not on this trip, and then I continued: haggle in a third world market place; bring breakfast to bed for someone I love; dip my toes in the Mediterranean, stand in the Sistine Chapel. To look up at that incredible ceiling and feel overwhelmed by its beauty would truly be remarkable and humbling. Buy a book and read it the same day, and dance in public (again). “I want to dance in the rain,” I said. Preferably, I thought, when no one is around to watch me. I would not be able to escape onlookers at the Eiffel Tower, but I could while fulfilling this not so serious item on my list.

I am too self-conscious about dancing. I always have been. At first, I thought it was because of my size and general awkwardness, but then I realized it was because I have never had what I would call rhythm. I cannot dance. Perhaps most people feel that way, but I *really* cannot. Maybe they are just better at pretending they can dance. Maybe they just don’t care if

people are watching them, but I do. Somehow I think my insecurity on the dance floor will flow through me—bleeding brilliant red as I move back and forth and draw more attention to me than I would like.

I often quote William H. Macy's character in the film *Wild Hogs* who says something like, "The music moves me; it just moves me ugly." That describes me to a tee, so I shy away from dancing—fast dancing at least. Slow dancing with a partner is different because it does not really require rhythm, just movement; my only worry is about stepping on my partner's toes and what to do with my hands. I am never comfortable putting my hands around someone's neck and having him put his hands on my waist. It feels awkward leaning into him, especially when it is someone I don't know well, but it is still not as awkward as dancing to a beat.

I will dance in public if I must; I have on more than one occasion, but I am uncomfortable. I do not know any particular dance moves, so I move in a general side stepping motion. I might snap my fingers or move my arms a little bit too until I get out of sync with the beat, and then I am screwed. Eventually, I give up. I am more than happy to guard my friends' purses against would be thieves and to people watch. I am very good at that—watching purses, and really, I do not mind. At least I tell myself that when they move onto the dance floor and leave me sitting at the table. I insist they go all the while wishing that I had the confidence to join them, that someone bypassed my friends to ask me to dance.

Since I was a little girl, I have always wanted to take dancing lessons. After college, I called the University of Rio Grande because I learned that ballroom dancing was being offered to non-students if they were interested. I would have joined, sure that I would become more comfortable in my own skin, that I would learn to be more flexible, more sure of my movements on the dance floor. But when I told the instructor that I was single, he told me that what I really

needed was a partner. The area in which I live is small; the number of people signed up for ballroom dance consisted of couples. As a singleton, I was out of luck.

If I lived in a larger city or closer to one, I believe I would find other single people there who were interested in learning to dance just as much as I was. Until then, I would have to resign myself to guarding purses or dancing alone in the privacy of my own home where the only judgment I received would come from my dogs and cat.

“Elle,” Kara said, her voice slightly higher than usual. “I need to use the *ty bach* [Welsh for restroom].”

Ellen sighed and shook her head as she glanced at me, but I did not say anything. The sky was no longer blue but a sad, dull gray, and rain had started to pelt the windshield. I hoped that the rain would fall then and not while we were on vacation. I wanted nothing more than to sit on the beach, read a good book, and occasionally look up at passersby while the waves of the Atlantic crashed into the shore. I am not one to actually get in the water. If I do, I will not stay for long because *Jaws* destroyed any sense of safety in the ocean for me when I was a kid. I know that it is irrational to think that I will be attacked by a shark and that statistically it is more likely I will be stung by a jellyfish, but it is sharks I worry about. Always have. Always will.

But I have a lot of irrational fears like that—ones I cannot explain or understand. I am just as afraid of clowns as I am of sharks. And spiders. I was bitten by one when I was a child, and my cousin used to throw Granddaddy Long Legs on me, so I have never really been able to forgive the species as a whole. It is their scuttling, furry little bodies coming at me that I fear. I am terrified that not only will I get bitten but that one will crawl into my ear or mouth while I am sleeping. I worry about this so much that I actually pull my hair down over my ears in the hopes

that if one should make the attempt I will feel it moving in my hair and wake up before it succeeds.

Once I learned that the Granddaddy Long Legs could not actually bite me because their mouths are too small, I am not as afraid of them and will actually free them if they are trapped inside. But other spiders—the woolly, fat ones that jump, or the ones that bring their many offspring inside because it's cold, for example—are destined to be killed if they enter my home. If I strike one and it falls behind the couch or lands where I cannot see that it is dead, I will search endlessly until I locate it and determine that it has indeed died. Only then can I rest. Otherwise, I'm petrified it and its spider-buddies will seek revenge.

My thoughts shifted from the ocean side to what was happening as Ellen steered the SUV towards the next exit. The sign just moments before said "Rest Area Next ____ Miles." It was either now or never, and I knew Kara and Cheryl would appreciate that Ellen was stopping now. But I knew, just like Ellen did, that we would have to stop again. And again. And again.

When Ellen parked, she did not immediately exit the vehicle. Instead, she turned on the radio, found some rock and roll song playing, cranked the stereo and said, "Come on, Wens," as she stepped out of the car.

"What are we doing?" I asked. I hadn't needed to use the restroom and had planned to wait in the car. I looked at her and then at Cheryl and Kara who had hesitated when they heard the music crank up.

"Crossing off 'number four' on your bucket list. Come on!" Ellen said as she started dancing in front of the vehicle.

Almost immediately, Kara and Cheryl began to dance too. The *ty bach* forgotten.

I paused. Other travelers were staring at my traveling companions, no doubt thinking them mad. What would they think of me? That I was just as crazy as the three of them, I imagined. And no doubt they would think that I could not dance. They would be right because my moves were not nearly as coordinated or as sophisticated as my friends'. Clearly, these women knew how to move and had rhythm.

“Come on, Wens!” Kara yelled as she and Cheryl began to bump hips.

I joined them and turned my face upwards. The rain fell, steady and slow. The music played. My friends were laughing, happy to be together, and eager to help me cross off an item on my bucket list. Their laughter was contagious. And I mimicked their dance...even if the music did “move me ugly.” *What the hell?*

At that moment, right then, I was with these women who wore confidence the way they wore their shoes, with high heeled certainty and just a little bit of flare.

I crossed “dancing in the rain” off my bucket list that day, and just as I predicted, I have added at least two more items in its place. And that’s okay. My list, like me, can change. It can grow big or shrink. What matters is that I have a list—that I have things I want to do, and as long as I know what I want, I can remind myself as well that it was okay to take a break, to get away with friends. It was okay to stop...just not on that trip.

“So Long, Sanibel”

Originally, it was supposed to be the four of us—me, Cheryl, Kara, and Ellen—when we decided to go to Sanibel, Florida once the semester ended. It was supposed to be our second trip together, another excursion to the beach, but this time it wasn't Myrtle Beach we wanted to explore. I don't remember how we settled on Sanibel exactly, except that we were going just after graduation and that it was before the tourists would swarm the island like ants drawn to a sugary, sticky sweetness.

Our plan was simple. We would fly to Fort Myers, Florida and then take a car across the bridge to Sanibel. A two bedroom condo, with an ocean view, awaited us. We would spend our days soaking up the sun, drinking iced cold adult beverages, and reading trashy literature. It was perfect, except for one thing: Cheryl's daughter Andie.

Almost immediately, our plans changed.

I was sitting in Ellen's office, admiring her many books and envying her ability to decorate space so that it looked both classy and relaxed. But then, that was the way Ellen looked too. Tall, thin, and elegant but relaxed, so much so that she could talk to anyone, whether it was a local business person or one of the many history students she taught at the University of Rio Grande (Rio Grande, Ohio).

I imagined we were talking about nothing in particular, probably trading stories about her husband Gene and my dad Roger, when Cheryl came down the hall. I couldn't see her, but I could definitely hear her. Cheryl wore high heels every day, and every day, we could hear her as she walked to and from her office. A loud, familiar clomp, clomp, clomp. Pointed heels struck tile.

“Hey,” she said as she moved in to Ellen’s office and sat down on the floor. Besides Ellen’s chair, I was occupying the only other one available, so Cheryl made herself comfortable, curling her legs under her.

I winced. I couldn’t sit on my knees, never could. When I practiced yoga on a regular basis, I could never perform child’s pose or do much that required me to be on my knees for any given length of time. Instead, I would improvise and do the best I could with props the yoga instructor had available, or I’d wait until I could change positions. That was what I loved about yoga; I could adapt the positions to suit me and still get a good workout.

“Wens and I were just about to talk about Sanibel,” Ellen said. Wens was a nickname she had given me years ago when we were students together.

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that. I promised Andie that I would do something with her during break and didn’t realize that it was the same week that I had agreed to go to Sanibel with all of you. It’s the only week that she has off from work, and I told her that we could do something together.” Cheryl said this in a rush of words as though she thought we might interrupt her.

“Okay,” Ellen said and waited.

It seemed to me too that Cheryl might have more to say, and she did.

“I promised her,” she said again. “So either I can’t go to Sanibel with you or she has to come with us. Either way, I’m doing something with Andie.” Firm, resolute. No room for discussion, it seemed.

I wasn’t too keen on this idea for several reasons. Andie was only nineteen, after all, and I wasn’t that interested in hanging out with someone so young. And I was sure she would be bored on Sanibel; after all, it wasn’t tourist season, so the island would be quiet and nightlife

would be minimal. The purpose of the trip was to go to the beach but to do as little as possible, and I couldn't help but think that this wouldn't appeal to her.

But Cheryl was definite. She was so blunt, so straightforward, so cut and dry that I didn't know how to react at first. I had never really seen Cheryl like this, so adamant. It was her way or no way, and I was genuinely surprised because in the two years or so that I had known her she had always seemed easy going, agreeable. Not this time though. This time was different, almost as though she expected resistance.

Silence filled the office until Ellen spoke. "Well, whatever you need to do, dear."

I remained silent. I got that way when I was upset or worried about hurting someone's feelings by saying what I thought. I had never been one of those women who could say what she wanted. To hell with the consequences. I envied those women.

I can't remember the rest of the conversation, but looking back, I'm sure that it involved a lot of my silence, Ellen telling Cheryl to do what she felt she needed in terms of Andie, and Cheryl insisting that Andie go with us or Cheryl wouldn't participate in this particular excursion.

When she left Ellen's office, Ellen stood and closed the door. "I don't want to spend my break with a kid," she said. "The whole point is to get away from kids, not take them with us."

I understood her frustration, but I wanted Cheryl to come with us too. We all had had so much fun the previous year in Myrtle Beach, and I hoped to recreate that experience in Florida. And if that meant Cheryl had to bring Andie, well, then I guessed that would be all right. We would work out the kinks—travel, rooms, etc. I tried to tell myself that this change in our plans wasn't that big of a deal, but I don't like change, and whether I wanted to admit it or not, I was annoyed that Cheryl threw this kink in our plans.

And more importantly, if Andie went with us, that meant there would be five of us, not four. Where would that leave me? Would I be the odd woman out? I had been in that situation many times before; I wasn't interested in a repeat performance. And perhaps on a deeper level, a more childish level, I worried I wouldn't get as much attention as I used to. To a degree, I supposed, we were all like that; we all wanted our moment in the spotlight when our friends paid attention to us, listened to us. What would it be like if they didn't care and paid more attention to each other instead of me?

Also, I didn't know Andie that well; I had met her once or twice when I had gone somewhere with Cheryl. My knowledge of her was limited. She was studying—I didn't know what—at Rio Grande; she had a boyfriend whose parents owned the Shake Shoppe franchise, and Andie worked there while she attended school. She drove a white Mustang. Its license plate read “Andz Pony.” She was an only child, blonde and tan, and she lived at home with Cheryl. And like Cheryl, she loved shopping, in particular, clothes shopping.

Why, I wondered, would she want to go Sanibel with a bunch of women much older than she? She didn't know any of us that well, and I doubted we had much in common, except Cheryl. She was the common factor.

In the end, none of us, Ellen, Kara, or me, put up a fuss, and it was decided that Andie would come to Sanibel. None of us insisted that Cheryl make other arrangements, that she go with Andie somewhere on her own. We were too polite about that, and instead, we didn't really say anything one way or the other. It would be fine.

But it wasn't.

Because Cheryl couldn't really afford plane tickets for both her and Andie, she suggested we drive to Sanibel. We could split the cost of gas and a hotel room. I hesitated; although I had

my own issues with flying, I wasn't too keen on the idea of traveling by car. It would be a long, long drive, but I relented. Driving could be just as much as an adventure as flying. And Kara, always wanting to save money if she could, was keen on the idea. It would be cheaper to split the cost of gas and a hotel room than it would be to fly, especially since there were four of us.

Ellen wasn't too happy about spending seventeen hours in a car and decided to go ahead and fly anyway. She'd get there a day or two before the rest of us and enjoy the quiet we all sought, and then when we got there, we could decide what we wanted to do with our days.

Despite Cheryl's insistence about Andie joining us and the decision to drive instead of fly, I knew this was trip was going to be memorable but didn't know how. Problems, little hiccups, before we left should have warned me. I should have listened to my gut, but I didn't. Instead, I let myself be persuaded because all I wanted was to go to the beach.

I was pretty quiet when we decided that we would use my car for the trip. Both Cheryl and Andie's cars were too small to hold everything that four women take on a week-long adventure, and Kara's vehicle was too old to withstand the long drive. So I offered up my vehicle. It made sense. After all, I had a four-wheel drive with lots of trunk space; we could pack as much as we needed and then some, including an air mattress that Andie agreed to use at the condo. It was wear and tear on my car, sure, but we would share costs. I could live with that.

But then, there was hesitation and confusion about when we would leave. First, we were leaving in the middle of the night; then, we were leaving early in the morning. Then, it was the afternoon. I don't remember what we finally decided, but what I remember is that I became very aggravated with all the changes with the plan. I liked knowing what I was doing and when. It

was important for me to know what to expect; that way I could anticipate what might happen or what needed to happen to ensure that we got where we were going.

Cheryl didn't understand that. On the night we were supposed to leave, she told me we were leaving early the next morning instead of around midnight or so, and I was frustrated. Not wanting to argue with her, I said something like, "Whatever." The agitation bled into my voice. I felt bullied and outnumbered, especially since Cheryl, Kara, and Andie would talk and then tell me what they had decided. It was my car, but I wasn't even consulted. It didn't matter what I wanted to do. And besides, I hated arguing with people.

When she asked me what was wrong or why I was mad, I responded with something like, "First, we were leaving at midnight. Then, it was around four in the afternoon, and now, you're telling me we're leaving at nine in the morning. It's really frustrating to me that we can't even decide what time to go. I thought we had a plan and now that's changed." I knew I sounded childish, whiney, but I couldn't help it. I hated change, and I particularly hated change at the last minute. "It's fine," I said. "Whatever. I'll see you in the morning then." And I hung up.

It wasn't ten minutes later when Kara called. "Wens," she said, "What's going on? Sissy said you were upset." She called Cheryl that sometimes, Sissy. After the trip to Myrtle Beach the previous year, she and Cheryl had grown very close.

We talked for some time, and I told her how frustrated I was about the time change. She didn't get it; she didn't understand why this bothered me so much. But I didn't expect Kara to. Change didn't bother her the way it did me. She was much more flexible than I was. But I had had that problem for as long as I could remember. I liked things the way I liked them, and I liked knowing what was going to happen from one moment to the next. I was a bit rigid that way. I still am.

I hesitated that night and thought seriously about not going. They could figure it out—how they'd get there, how they'd divvy up the cost of things. Part of me wished I had listened to that warning bell sounding in my head saying, "Don't go! Don't go!" But I didn't. Why? I didn't want them to be upset with me, and even though my instincts told me this trip was a bad idea, I still wanted to go.

I had never been that far south. I had visited Florida years before but had only gone to Orlando and Daytona; I wanted to see Sanibel, where the water moved casually to and from shore and seashells pockmarked the sand.

And so, we left the next morning, not as early as I would have preferred; seven would have been good, but nine o'clock it was. We crammed everything into the trunk of my car and set off. The drive itself was uneventful, except that somehow it was understood among Cheryl, Kara, and Andie but not me, that Andie would not contribute to the expenses we incurred on the road. Gasoline costs were split three ways, not four.

That bugged me; it always had—not splitting things equally. After all, Andie was an adult. A young adult, but one who had a job. It wasn't a spur of the moment trip, so I thought she could have contributed, but that was just me. Wanting to keep the peace, I didn't say anything; instead, I let it fester in silence. I always believed in sharing the load. What got me, though, a lot of times, were couples, more so than parents or children. Couples, at least some of the ones I knew, tended to count themselves as a unit, and that meant splitting a cab two ways when three people shared the ride. I found that irritating. Three bodies meant three people took on the expense, right? My parents even split things evenly and didn't look at themselves as a unit, and they had always told me that it was important to support myself and pay my own way.

I always worried about not paying my share, and any time I took a trip with friends or split dinner with them or did anything that involved money, I insisted on knowing what my portion of the bill was. And I paid. I didn't want to be that friend, the one who always participated but never contributed. I probably annoyed my friends when I insisted that they tell me how much I owed them, but I didn't want any of them paying for me when I could pay for myself.

We stopped that night at a hotel, split three ways, of course, and continued to Sanibel the next day. It was uneventful, that drive. Despite the initial frustration I experienced with the change in schedule, I thought the journey was as pleasant as a seventeen hour road trip could be.

True to her word, Ellen was already there. She waved at us from the third floor and helped us carry all our bags into the condo.

Once we got inside, I called my parents to let them know I was there. I didn't want Mom to worry, but I knew that she would no matter how old I was. My dad worried too, even though he wasn't as vocal about it. He expressed his worry when I wasn't there. He would listen as cars passed, pull back the curtain to identify the vehicle, to see if it was mine. He would stay awake well past his usual bedtime until he saw me pull into the driveway, and only then would he go to bed. He always told me to be careful but never played the "what if" game. He was a silent worrier unlike Mom. But I assured them both that everything was fine and turned my attention back to unpacking.

Cheryl, Kara, and Andie took the master bedroom. It had plenty of space for Andie to spread out the air mattress, and because it was mine or rather one I had borrowed from another friend so that we would have something for her to sleep on, I helped her and Cheryl set it up against the far wall and ready it for that night. I left them to finish unpacking and moved to the

room I was sharing with Ellen. It had twin beds and was much smaller than the master bedroom, but it was manageable. Ellen and I had shared a room before, so I knew we would be fine with limited space.

Before long, we donned bathing suits and headed outside. I had always been uncomfortable wearing bathing suits. I don't know if it was because of my size or just feeling exposed, but I know that I would have preferred to have my arms and legs covered as much as possible. I don't think it was just women of size who had this insecurity but all women who had grown up being told to not show their midriffs or to cover themselves up. I thought I would feel better in anything besides a bathing suit, but I put one on anyway and joined the other ladies on the beach.

The sunshine warmed me as I tilted my head up; eyes closed. That red tint behind my eyelids that told me I was staring right into the sun. "Hello, Handsome," I thought to myself. I felt myself start to relax, happy that I was finally there, in Sanibel, with my friends.

When I was in high school, I was envious of my fellow students who went to the beach every spring. I had never seen the ocean and wanted to, desperately. Why? It was just a body of water, but it was important to me that I saw it. Someone once said to me that we needed to return to the water every so often, to reconnect, get our bearings, but I had never been to the ocean. How could I reconnect with something I had never experienced?

I opened my eyes again and turned towards the sand covered hill I had just crested moments before and then back to the water. I was overwhelmed; I was always in awe when I saw the ocean. Its waves rolled to shore with an air of confidence and then gently backed away again. An intricate dance of water and power. I stood perfectly still to take it all in. I paused, like I should. I became a child again, small but confident in my steps as I walked towards that

wide expanse of water. Its constant motion reminded me that change, whether I liked it or not, was inevitable. No stasis. I moved forward; I moved back. I danced, like the waves. And the water would always welcome me.

Day passed into night, and night into day. And the next evening, I learned that Andie didn't like sleeping on the air mattress in the master bedroom, and Cheryl and Kara, who was sharing the queen sized bed with Cheryl, didn't want to use it either. They didn't know what to do and wanted to reconfigure the sleeping arrangements. Ellen wasn't expected to give up her bed because she had made all the arrangements for the condo and was technically covering the charges until we paid her back. And Cheryl was adamant that she wasn't sleeping on the floor and neither was Andie.

And Kara, always the problem solver, proposed the following solution. She said, "The couch turns into a bed. One of us could sleep out here."

"Andie wants to stay with someone; she doesn't want to stay out here by herself," Cheryl said.

I wanted to say that Andie was old enough to sleep in a room by herself, that she did at home, but I didn't. I hesitated. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, Andie and I were a lot alike. I still lived at home. I had my own hesitations about leaving the place where I grew up; I had moved out for about a year but came back home. I returned to where I felt safe; whether or not my parents needed me (and they did), especially as they aged and had health problems, I wanted to be there. It was my comfort zone.

Like Andie, I depended on my mom. We did things together. And she spoiled me. And Cheryl spoiled Andie. I don't think she could help it any more than my mom could. And like Andie, I was used to getting my way. My mom would have taken my side, the way Cheryl did

with Andie. Maybe that was one of the reasons why I resented where this conversation was headed. I knew what was coming next.

Kara said, “Wendi could stay out here. Andie could take the twin in Ellen’s room, and you and I can still share the master bedroom.”

“I don’t want to sleep out here,” I began. “I would prefer staying in the bedroom I’m in.” My voice was quiet. My face was hot. I didn’t like confrontation, and that was exactly what I had hoped to avoid. Another confrontation, another disagreement, another frustration.

“But Andie doesn’t want to either, and neither do I,” was Kara’s argument.

It was a lame argument, but it was the one she insisted upon. Between her and Cheryl, they kept repeating that Andie didn’t want to use the air mattress and that she didn’t want to sleep in the living room. Neither did I, but that didn’t seem to matter.

Since this roundabout argument wasn’t getting us anywhere, I buckled. I gave in. I didn’t say much after that; I never said much when I was angry or upset, mainly because I knew I would start crying. I did that when I was angry as much as I hated it. I bit my lip and kept silent, until I was ready to go to bed.

It was then that I started removing the couch cushions, making it known that they would have to vacate the area because I wanted to go to sleep. It was a childish move, I knew, but I felt as though I didn’t have any control over anything else at that point. As much as I hated to admit it, I wanted my way, and I felt as though this was the only way to get what I wanted—to be left alone.

When I woke the next morning, I hauled my camping chair, book, sunscreen and bottled water down to the beach. I wasn’t willing to sit in the sand or on a low beach chair; I wanted to

be comfortable. It was a blue sky day, sunlight bounced off the water. I was intent on reading and watching people as they passed when Kara came along. I hadn't been there very long.

“Did Cheryl and Andie say anything to you about going into town?” She asked. Her Welsh accent thick with the heat.

I shook my head no, thinking that perhaps she had come down to the beach to ask me if I wanted to join the three of them for some event or other. The three of them had found Sanibel lacking in things to do and were more interested in Fort Myer where they could go shopping or clubbing or whatever it was they wanted to do. They were less interested in sitting on the beach, staring at the water and contemplating this or that and more interested in being engaged in some activity or other.

“They took your car,” Kara stated matter of factly.

“What?” I was many things all at once—surprised, hurt, angry. Why didn't they ask me? I would never take something that belonged to anyone without asking first. Never.

Kara nodded her head. “I thought they came to ask you. I told them where you were.”

“No, they didn't. I haven't seen them.”

“Well, I thought you should know,” she said. “They should have asked you.”

“Yeah, they should have,” I agreed.

I wouldn't have cared, really, if they had just asked me before they took the car. That wasn't entirely true; if they didn't ask me to join them, I probably would have been hurt. But I didn't believe I would have told them that they couldn't go, that they couldn't use the car. I wouldn't have wanted to have yet another disagreement.

That was what this trip was beginning to feel like to me—one long disagreement.

I regretted so many things: not acting on my instincts to stay home, not being more adamant about what I expected and letting myself be coerced into doing what the others wanted, and most importantly, not saying what I wanted without fear of confrontation. Saying it in a way that would allow me to discuss an issue with someone without resorting to anger or tears to express myself. I had never been able to do that; emotion got me every single time, and as much as I hated it, it affected my ability to say what I mean.

Day passed into night, and night passed into day. I continued my solitary ramblings on the beach while Cheryl, Andie, and Kara ventured to Fort Myers. Ellen stayed behind as well, at the condo, usually on the deck reading a book. We talked and talked often, but I spent a lot of time alone, like she did. Part of me regretted that I wasn't with the others, that eventually I wasn't included in their plan making, but some of that was my own doing. I chose to go down to the beach and not participate in their schemes. I chose to separate myself from them. I thought it was less complicated that way. That if I didn't want to do what they did from the get go, I wouldn't seem like such a jerk. But if I had budged, maybe just an inch, relented a little, not held on to my frustration and anger at being left behind or not considered in the very beginning, I might have gotten involved in the plans they made for the rest of the trip. But I was stubborn. I knew that.

I walked the beach, read books, watched people and spoke to them as they passed. Most of the time, I encountered singletons who, like me, searched for shells and wanted to feel the ocean salt on their skin. We nodded, said hello, and continued our walk. Later, when I returned to the condo, I could still hear the waves saying goodnight as they came to shore.

Finally, when we left Sanibel, the drive back was tension filled. I wanted to push through, to get home, but the others wanted to stop. More heated conversations took place,

especially between me and Cheryl. Andie occasionally interjected while Kara tried to maintain the peace. I gave in, trying to quell my anger and frustration at being left behind. But I didn't know who I was more upset with—they or me.

For some time after Sanibel, Cheryl and I didn't really talk to one another. When we did, we were tense with one another until one day we just treated each other the way we did before Sanibel, and everything was all right. As all right as it could be. We never really talked about what happened on Sanibel, except in very general terms and then we didn't mention the disagreements or the tensions that developed over that short period of time.

In hindsight, I can admit that I didn't want Andie to go on our trip, that I thought her going put a damper on our plans. That I thought I would be left out, and whether I meant to or not, I helped make that a reality. I thought Sanibel would be like our trip to Myrtle Beach the year before, and when it wasn't, I resented going. I didn't like the constant changes, the continuing need to go places and do things. I wanted to sit on the beach with my girlfriends, instead of by myself, yet I didn't invite them to go with me. I wanted to be included but to a degree intentionally excluded myself. Doing so caused the rift between us to become greater than it needed to be. I should have told them how I really felt and addressed the situation with my car as soon as it happened; then, it wouldn't have happened again. But that is why it's called hindsight, right? Coulda, woulda, shoulda.

Sometime soon, though, I would like to go back to Sanibel with my friends. However, Kara is in Wales now, and Cheryl is in Missouri. But maybe I could go with Ellen...she and I can sit on the beach together; each of us holding a book in one hand and a cool drink in the other, chatting occasionally, but listening to the water as it calls to us to come back again and again. And perhaps we can reconnect, with ourselves and with each other.

“Nestled Inn”

I should have been working, but instead, I was planning my vacation. 2014 had arrived, and with it, renewed PTO (paid time off) days that begged to be scheduled. And because I like schedules (order), I plan my time off as carefully and thoughtfully as possible, and I do so well in advance. This year was no different. So instead of responding to work related emails and fielding questions from students, I scoured both my academic and personal calendar to determine what days in September I would venture to Tennessee again.

I had been visiting Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee for seven years now, and I wasn't tired of the mountains yet. Again and again, year after year, I kept telling myself that I would visit the ocean instead, but I had grown comfortable going to Tennessee. Comfort is important to me. Always will be. I knew the route; I knew how to maneuver in bumper to bumper traffic as I made my way through Pigeon Forge, and I had used the same rental company, Mountain Chalets, for so long that I had earned free two nights' stay. And I wasn't about to let that pass by.

So I logged on to the company website and immediately checked availability for Nestled Inn, a small, quaint cabin high in the mountains that I had rented for the last five years now. It was close enough to other properties in case of emergency but far enough away that I could enjoy the quiet. Going to Tennessee was always a time to put away the cell phones, unplug the television, and enjoy nature—from a porch, of course.

I had never been the outdoor type but had always said that I preferred nature from a window. I was not one of those people who wanted to go hiking in the woods. I drove. I have seen too many movies depict what can happen if people do visit nature with nothing more than their own two feet, a camera, and a bottle of water. Everything from breaking bones to being

attacked by a serial killer or some wild critter they've gotten too close to, for that perfect shot. No thank you. I was more than happy to sit on the deck at Nestled Inn or to enjoy a drive through Cades Cove, but I was not interested in walking trails or photographing wildlife up close and personal.

But right then, at that moment, I was interested in scheduling my vacation and booking the cabin, and to take advantage of the two free days, I had to book online with assistance from a customer service representative or on the phone. For some reason, the online booking system would not accept the code for free nights. Technology is great—when it cooperates. I learned a long time ago, though, that I couldn't trust computers 100%. I needed a back-up plan, especially when it came to work. And now, apparently, I needed an alternative in order to schedule my vacation.

I started an online chat with Sarah, a Mountain Chalets representative. Customer service is vital to any organization's success, and Mountain Chalets had some of the most helpful and friendly people working for them. I had never had a bad experience booking cabins, purchasing tickets for some of the tourist attractions in Tennessee, or having someone come to the cabin to service the hot tub or bring me a new coffee maker because the one I had didn't work. It was no surprise that I used the same company over and over; it was due to the service and my comfort level. I stick with what I know. And when a company is good to me, I stick with it too.

And I really liked Nestled Inn, the cabin I had used for so long, so when Sarah told me via our chat that I would not be able to rent the property again, I was confused because the dates I had selected were available. Her response was, "You are on the 'do not rent to' list, and I'm sorry, but you cannot rent that property or any other property owned by this individual." A lot of

the rental properties Mountain Chalets made available to tourists were privately owned, and in this case, Nestled Inn was owned by a couple, Gary and Annette Guy.

I remembered my first (and only) encounter with Gary.

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My best friend Tracy and I have been traveling to together for years. She and I have been friends as long as I can remember; we have a lot in common—only children, a love for reading and going to the movies. As kids, we played, fought and made up, and played again like children usually did. Just a couple of years older than I am, Tracy looks considerably younger what with a round face and rosy cheeks. At forty-three years old, she has no lines of worry or wrinkles around her eyes. She is as lively as she looks young, and the customers at the grocery store where she works love her. And I do too.

I wish that I had her natural friendliness, that I could just strike up conversations with total strangers. As I have gotten older, I am better at that, but I still find myself in social situations becoming very quiet, very introverted until I feel my way. Then, I cannot stop talking.

I am not exactly sure why we ever settled on Tennessee as a place to go, especially Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. Another thing Tracy and I have in common is that neither of us is interested in shopping or visiting amusement parks, but we wanted someplace to get away. When Tracy and I go to Tennessee, we never turn on the television. We hardly play music. Our cell phones barely work. It is great. We don't need to be connected to anything; our family has the number to the cabin if an emergency occurs, but other than that, we have no reason to be on our cell phones or accessing the internet.

It isn't too far from home, just in case our parents need us.

It is odd thinking about how we take care of our parents now when they used to take care of us. Sometimes it is beyond frustrating when my mom wants things done on her time frame as opposed to mine, and I cannot make her understand that I have to keep some sort of schedule in order to get everything done. I need that kind of order, but since Mom has retired and suffered a multitude of health problems, her schedule no longer exists. And it is hard for her to adapt to mine and vice versa. I remind myself often that I shouldn't become so frustrated when she would prefer to sleep instead of having dinner or taking her bath, but I still find myself annoyed when she is ready to do those things and I am in the middle of something else. I also remind myself that she and my dad spent their lives taking care of me, and they still do to some degree. So I should not mind helping take care of them now that they are older. And I don't mind really. I just wish we had a less chaotic, somewhat nonexistent schedule. I crave consistency and routine and seek it where I can because there are plenty of instances where I lack that control I want so badly.

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The road leading to Nestled Inn was harrowing, straight up and twisting like a worm inching along a branch. I fretted about meeting someone coming down the hill as I went up, but in the years we had stayed there, that only happened once.

I zigged; he zagged, and I went slightly off the side of the road. Fortunately, neither of us was going very fast, and the drop off was minimal, and I had no trouble pulling the car back onto the road. We both stopped, rolled down our windows, and said, "Are you okay?"

"Sorry 'bout that," Gary Guy said. "I should know better. I live here. I know that people come up and down this road all the time. I just wasn't thinkin'."

“That’s okay,” I responded, thankful that the road wasn’t as treacherous as others I had traveled when staying in Tennessee. In fact, until Tracy and I found Nestled Inn, we always inquired about the roads leading to the cabins we used. Gravel was bad; paved was better. But they were always narrow, and we never, ever, wanted to meet someone on them because usually there was no place to go.

“Are you enjoying your stay at Nestled Inn?”

“Yes,” Tracy and I both said at the same time. It was true. We loved the place. That was why we returned again and again.

“My name’s Gary. Gary Guy. My wife Annette and I own the place.”

As it turned out, he and Annette owned at least five cabins that were available for rental, and they lived in a place of their own just down the road from Nestled Inn. We saw them leave early each morning and return each night. They would wave to us and often asked how we were doing as they unlocked and re-locked the gate that barred entry to strangers. Very friendly.

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“What do you mean, ‘do not rent to’ list? Is there some reason?” I typed before pressing the Enter key to continue my online chat with Sarah. I felt the heat flood my face; I was getting upset, convinced that there was some sort of mistake.

After several moments of seeing the words “Operator Is Typing” appear on the screen, Sarah responded. “Due to excessive cleaning after your last stay.”

Excessive cleaning? What the hell was this? I wondered. “I’m not sure I understand,” I typed. “Excessive cleaning? This is the first time I’ve heard anything about there being any sort of problem with my last stay.”

“I’m sorry, but that is what is noted on your portfolio. I would be happy to assist you in finding another cabin within that price range, one that meets your expectations.”

“I don’t understand,” I typed. My fingers flying frantically over the keys. Co-workers came in and out of the office I shared with other faculty. I was sure they thought I was passionately working on lesson plans or something like. “I have a telephone number for Annette and Gary. Should I call them to discuss this? I find it difficult to believe that there was a problem with the cabin. We followed the protocols set forth by your company.”

Mountain Chalets always provided a “to do list” for renters when they left that included taking out the trash, cleaning the refrigerator out, and turning on the dishwasher, that sort of thing. Both Tracy and I had followed their procedures to a tee, and after our stay ended, we hadn’t been notified that there was a problem nor had we been charged an additional cleaning fee.

Operator is typing. “You are welcome to contact her, but in the meantime, would you like me to conduct a search for other cabins that are similar?”

I asked her to wait and told her that I would contact her shortly.

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In 2012, the drive to the cabin was uneventful. Tracy and I did not meet Gary or Annette on the road to Nestled Inn, and we navigated the slow moving traffic between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg like experts. Every September, the three lanes that came into Pigeon Forge were congested with minivans, motorcycles, and trucks, their beds laden with people. I read the license plates, commenting to Tracy on the places everyone was from, a habit I had since childhood. We moved at a snail’s pace, and what would take about twenty minutes on a normal day took at least an hour or more during the weekend of the car show. Cars moved from one

lane to another; the drivers hoped to get just a little further ahead, just a little quicker than the next guy who did the same thing. But not me. I stayed in the same lane, knowing that if I bounced back and forth like a prize fighter gearing up for a fight I would need to be in the right lane but would be too far left. So I inched forward, stopping occasionally to let a car in my lane. But eventually, we got there, unpacked and nestled in.

The mountains were still a lush green, even in late September. As the sun found its way to slumber, lights from our distant neighbors appeared sporadically throughout the hills. I wondered if, like us, they had just needed to get away, to find quiet, to settle into themselves and recharge until it was time to return to reality. I hoped that we all found whatever it was we sought. For me, it was rest. Rest from teaching and the constant to and fro with students and administration, from worrying about my parents, from responsibility and obligations. Just relaxation.

Most days, Tracy and I spent on the deck. We read, waved at Annette and Gary, and talked. We rarely left the cabin, except to pick up supplies at the local Food City or to go out and about on an excursion or two. This usually included rounds of mini golf and one (only one, since we cooked at the cabin) dinner show, followed by a trip to the aquarium. It was silly, I know, but the point was to rest and to do as little as possible. Not run around trying to see and do everything we possibly could like I did when I traveled to Europe. We selected our adventures sparingly and with careful consideration because we wanted to soak up the peacefulness that permeated the mountains. Bottle it up, maybe, and take it home with us where, hopefully, it would last until the next vacation.

I happened to be outside on the deck one morning, enjoying a lot of creamer with my coffee, when I heard Tracy talking to someone. A white SUV had driven up our road and

stopped just outside our cabin. Tracy had taken the garbage outside when the vehicle stopped and a conversation ensued.

“Who were you talking to?” I asked when she returned.

“Annette.”

Two days later, Annette stopped again. This time Tracy and I both talked to her.

“Have you been out to Cades Cove yet?” Annette asked us.

“Not yet, no, but we were talking about going,” I said as Tracy and I leaned into Annette’s rolled down passenger window.

Annette was blond, older than us by at least ten or fifteen years, and sounded more like a Yankee than we did, and most of the time, people north of Ohio thought that we were from the south. She had a strong, nasal accent; Michigan as it turned out, or maybe it was somewhere further north. She and Gary had moved to Tennessee years ago and began building cabins that they rented to tourists who came to the area every year. Although she and Gary used the Mountain Chalet Rental Company to schedule reservations and what not, she cleaned all of the cabins herself and made sure that whatever visitors needed was handled by the rental company or by them.

“Tomorrow morning, my friend Pam and I are going if you’d like to go with us,” Annette said. “You girls are more than welcome to go. We’ll probably leave here around five-thirty in the morning, get out to the Cove, spend a few hours, and then we can go have lunch afterwards.”

Tracy and I looked at one another and shrugged. “That sounds really nice, thank you,” I said.

“Well, if you don’t have any plans and want to go, just give me a call. Here’s my number,” Annette said as she wrote her cell phone number on a slip of paper and handed it to us

through the window. “It’ll be a lot of fun. Pam’s a great gal. Bring your cameras and snacks, coffee, whatever you want.”

She chatted with us a little longer about our plans for the week, what we had already done and what we had seen, and encouraged us to go with her the next day.

We talked about it that night and decided that we would go. After all, it was one of our planned excursions, and we would both be able to gawk at the scenery, look for wildlife, and not have to worry about bumping the car in front of us.

Cades Cove was an eleven mile loop through the heart of the Gatlinburg National Forest. It was closed on certain mornings to traffic so that bicyclists could make the loop without fear of being struck by moving cars. Granted, traffic moved at less than fifteen miles an hour most of the time and vehicles stopped often to watch various critters in their natural habitat, but vehicles could be hazardous to a bicyclist’s health.

I was always amazed at the visitors who stepped outside of their vehicles to get that perfect shot of a bear as it waddled through the thick blanket of forest. Not me, no sir. Nature from a rolled up car window or from the deck was what I preferred. I wasn’t going to be one of those people who ended up being attacked by some wild animal because I got too close to it and couldn’t outrun the damn thing. People thought I was funny when I claimed that I was not a lover of the outdoors and would never be found hiking or venturing out into the great unknown just because it was pretty. No thank you. I like to *look* at nature, but I don’t really like to be *in* nature, per se.

I didn’t know what sort of adventure was in store for us.

Instead of staying in the faculty office I shared with two other people, I moved into a classroom and closed the door before I tried to call Annette. She did not answer; instead, I got her voice mail, so I left a rambling message like I tend to do when I'm nervous or upset. I have a tendency to speak before I totally collect my thoughts, and sometimes I don't feel I'm as articulate as I could be.

“Hi Annette, this is Wendi Kozma. The reason I'm calling is because I tried to book Nestled Inn for September, like I usually do, and the customer service rep told me that I was on a 'do not rent to' list due to excessive cleaning that had to be done to the cabin. I'm really confused about all this and wanted to talk to you about. If you would, please give me a call back. I really would appreciate it.” I hung up and waited.

Not five minutes later, the phone rang.

At first, Annette was friendly-enough. When I asked how she was, she said that she was trying to stay warm like she imagined I was doing. (Ohio, and much of the eastern United States, had suffered a cold snap, and we were all miserable and freezing.)

I repeated my reason for contacting her, much like the message I had left.

She said, almost immediately cutting me off, “Yes, I did add you to the list. I just couldn't understand why you and Tracy would leave the cabin in such horrible conditions. The kitchen...it looked like an atomic bomb had gone off in there. There was so much grease built up that the walls had to be washed down, and outside, on the deck, the grease from food was so thick that I had to have the deck power washed. And, frankly, Wendi, I just couldn't let that happen again.”

My face flushed, and I felt tears stinging the backs of my eyes. Surely, she had confused us with someone else staying at Nestled Inn. Maybe she had documented the information on the

wrong portfolio, ours. “I don’t understand,” I began, trying to control the shaking in my voice. This always happened to me when I became upset. My face would get hot; my voice shook, and eventually, as much as I hated it, I would start crying. Why couldn’t I just lose my temper and yell when I got upset? No, I cried. And then I would get even more upset because I was crying. But I tried to hold myself together. I wanted to get to the bottom of this.

“I don’t understand either,” Annette interrupted. Gone was the friendly, fast talking northerner who invited us to tour Cades Cove with her. Instead, I found a haughtiness that I had seen in her then, in 2012. “I don’t understand how you could treat the cabin, me, that disrespectfully. You might live that way in your own home, but I don’t, and it is not acceptable. Not at all.”

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The morning we left for Cades Cove it was pitch black outside save for the mountain night lights that still burned brightly in the distance, yet the fog rolled in as we made our way along roads that looped higher and higher into the hills. Eventually, the car stopped at one of those houses we had seen in the distance from our deck, and Pamela climbed inside. She was dark haired and small in stature, with glasses, and like Annette, she had that same contagious laugh and was a bit too perky for an early morning excursion. I was intentionally quiet, like I always was in the mornings. I could get up early, but it always took me awhile to wake up.

We chatted the way strangers did when they didn’t really know each other and weren’t sure what to say. It was always awkward getting to know someone new, at least it always had been for me. I had a tendency to listen more than I talked about myself, but I found myself sharing information with them about what I did for a living, graduate school, trips I had taken. I

soon felt at ease with these ladies and soon found myself waking up, laughing and joining in the general raucous conversation.

We slowly moved through Cades Cove, stopping occasionally to take pictures and gawk at the scenery. Wildlife was scarce, but despite that, the drive was pleasant enough. And afterwards, as we pulled onto the highway to take us through the Gatlinburg National Forest again, Annette said, "I want to take you girls to Ms. Lilly's for lunch. How does that sound?"

"Sure," Tracy said.

"Sounds good to me," I added.

But Ms. Lilly's was closed when we got there. The restaurant didn't open for another hour, so Annette ushered us all back into her SUV, and the four of us started looking about for another restaurant in the area. We spotted one, The Apple Orchard, that was situated among some craft stores. It looked pleasant enough when we stepped inside and reminded me of a deli that offered a small variety of soups and sandwiches for purchase.

Tracy and I were reading over the menu when suddenly Pam started laughing and said, "Okay."

"What is it?" I asked because Annette had turned to face us, laughing a little bit too.

"We have to leave. I'm not eating here. I'm not eating on a paper plate. I can do that at home," Annette said. If it was really possible for someone to turn down her nose at an idea, Annette succeeded. "Come on, let's go." And with that, we exited the restaurant, no doubt leaving the lady behind the counter confused.

I didn't understand why we couldn't have eaten there. It looked all right to me, quaint even, with its country décor and relaxed manner. But I left with little objection.

We found another restaurant just a little further down the road. The Back Porch looked just like any old house, and I thought it had been, once we stepped inside. A cash register had been set up in the front room of the house which had been partitioned off, separating it from the dining room just behind it. It had an old time feel to it, a comfortable feel, but I thought that we might be served on paper plates here too and vaguely wondered if we would leave there too. At that point, though, I was so tired that I didn't care if we ate with our bare hands as long as we ate.

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“Annette,” I began again. “I would never treat anyone’s home disrespectfully. Tracy and I complied with the rental company’s check out procedures, and I thought everything was fine. I wasn’t aware that there was any kind of problem until now.”

“That’s because I decided not to have you charged for the additional cleaning. I just bit the bullet on that and ate the cost, but it took at least five man hours to clean the place.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think that we left the cabin in such bad conditions that it would have caused extensive cleaning. I really wish I would have been made aware of the problem, if there was one, so that I could have talked to you about it then and rectified the situation.”

She talked over me at that point, again reiterating how the cabins she rented was “her heart and soul” and how she couldn’t understand why we would leave Nestled Inn in such a terrible state. “I can’t justify giving you another chance,” she said. “Fool me once, but twice.”

“Twice?” I interrupted this time. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t have the portfolio in front of me, but I know that I documented in 2012 that I had to do a lot of work on the cabin after you left. And then when it happened again in 2013, I just couldn’t rent to you again.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Two years in a row we had left the cabin in unsavory conditions? I treated other people's homes better than my own. For years, I had helped out my friends, housesitting for them, and they never complained that I was too messy.

My voice continued its quivering, I'm upset about all this shaking. I said, "I don't want to argue with you," because I felt like that was what was happening. It was her word against mine, and I had not taken any pictures of the cabin before and after we stayed there. I wished I had. "But I'm sorry if you felt that Tracy and I disrespected your property. In no way was that our intention. And I really wish that I had known that there was a problem two years ago so that we could have made sure whatever you expected had been done. I thought we had a rapport and that you would have talked to me if something hadn't met your expectations."

She ignored most of that, except to say, "I thought we had a rapport too, but as I said, I just can't rent to someone who treats my cabins that way. Those are my heart and soul."

The conversation, this roundabout discussion, lasted just a few more minutes because by that time I was so upset I had started to cry—just like I knew I would. "I'm sorry, Annette, that you feel we left the cabin in such a state, but I don't feel that we did. I feel that we did everything according to the rental company's procedures. I just wish I would have known there was a problem before now. I'm sorry this happened."

Even when I am wrongfully accused, I have a tendency to apologize. I want to rectify situations, make them right. It upsets me greatly to have someone think that I did something when I know that I didn't, something that caused them additional work or caused them to put me on a 'do not rent to' list. I don't like being accused of something when I know that what I was supposed to in terms of the rental agreement. I am not a slob. I may be lazy, and I may hate housework more than most people, but I have never in my life treated someone's home or

property where I have stayed with anything besides respect. Houses tend to look as though I was never in them.

“I’m sorry too,” Annette said. “Although you cannot rent cabins that belong to me, you can still rent cabins through Mountain Chalets. Is there anything you would like me to do to help arrange another stay through them?”

Did she really just say that? Suddenly, she was back in that nicey-nice mode and wanted to be helpful? What the hell.

She heard the angry tears lodged in my throat. “No,” I sputtered. “That’s all right. I’ve been in contact with them and will phone them in a little while. Thank you.” And with that, I hung up the phone.

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I didn’t leave the classroom until I was recovered enough to join my co-workers in the faculty office area, but even then, people knew I was upset about something. When I get upset, my whole body shows it. I’m very expressive, and people can always tell when I am angry or sad or confused. In this case, I was all of the above.

But I didn’t talk about it for a long, long time. Not until I had calmed down, processed what had happened, and had time to discuss the situation again with Sarah at Mountain Chalets. She verified that Annette had indeed logged “excessive cleaning” in both 2012 and 2013, that she was “very particular” about her cabins, and that renters were only notified *if* there was an additional charge incurred because of a problem. And because I asked, she verified that there had been no complaints with the other cabins I had rented prior to our years at Nestled Inn.

“When something like this happens, regardless of additional fees, I think that renters should be notified so that the problem, if there is one, can be immediately addressed,” I typed

during our second online chat. “I’m extremely upset about all this and feel that my reputation has been comprised as a renter with your company,” I continued. “I have rented Nestled Inn for five years now, and there’s never been a problem. I hardly think that in the last two years I have suddenly become so slovenly that the cabin was left in unacceptable conditions.”

Sarah assured me that my reputation was not tarnished and that I could rent from them, anytime. I reiterated that it would only be common courtesy to alert patrons to issues and that I felt it was very unprofessional of Annette to not mention anything about problems with the cabin. In fact, it was passive aggressive. She had no intention of saying anything to us directly; why? To avoid conflict? Instead, she flagged my portfolio, not once...but twice?

Sarah once more said that she would be happy to send me some links to cabins with similar specifications and pricing. I told her that would be lovely, thanked her for her assistance, and ended the online chat. Then, I started to rant.

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After talking to Tracy, a close friend at work, and a friend from college, I cannot come up with a definitive conclusion about what happened with Annette and our stay at Nestled Inn. In 2012, Tracy and I went to Cades Cove with Annette and Pam, and everything seemed to go well. We had a good time together, laughing and finding a place to eat. Nothing seemed out of sorts, and we separated on good terms after spending the day together. Yet that was the same year she flagged my portfolio about having to clean excessively.

In 2013 Tracy and I saw her in passing as she and Gary unlocked and locked their gate. Pleasantries were exchanged; she even loaned us a baking dish when we didn’t have one and called her to ask if she had one we could use. But the cabin was once again left in such a disastrous state that she didn’t say anything to us but documented it in my file?

What happened in that time? I have a theory about what may have happened, and others agree with me. Tracy and I had rented the same, small cabin for five years in a row; we are both single women in our forties; neither of us has been married; we travel together all the time, and we are very close. In 2012 when we ventured out to the Cove with her, did Annette think we were a couple? And if she did, was she so bothered by the idea that she thought about how she might prevent us from renting Nestled Inn again? Could she be so vindictive? She couldn't label us as lesbians, but she could label us as slovenly renters. And if she did that, she shouldn't do it once but twice to avoid suspicion? Was she that calculating?

I think so. Something definitely happened between 2012 and now, and the only thing that did was that Tracy and I spent a day with her and Pam. Looking back, I don't think we hinted or suggested that there was something between us other than friendship. But if we had, what would it have mattered?

But something did matter to her. I just don't know what. If the place had been as trashed as she claimed, why wouldn't she have asked the rental company to charge us an additional fee for cleaning? Especially if it happened twice.

I don't understand, and even though Annette is little more than an acquaintance, I thought that she was the kind of lady who would have been comfortable talking to me if there had been any kind of problem. She didn't strike me as someone who wouldn't say anything, jot a complaint down in a file, and then let someone else (in this case, a customer service rep) deal with it. But whether I like it or not, that is what happened.

And like it or not, I'm sorry that it happened and that it played out the way it did. Part of me wishes I hadn't phoned her that day to see why I had been placed on the 'do not rent to' list,

but I thought that I could because Tracy and I had become more than just renters. We had become people she knew, at least a little bit.

But apparently, she isn't interested in getting to know us. At least not any more.

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This year, Tracy and I will be staying at a cabin aptly named "Escape to a View." It is small, but big enough, and has everything we need—a hot tub, a Jacuzzi, and an incredible view of the mountains. I tell myself that maybe it is time for a change. We had stayed too long at Nestled Inn, gotten too familiar with our surroundings, become too relaxed in that space.

Yes, I like consistency. I like patterns. I do not like change, but maybe it is time. With a little bit of luck and a lot of planning, we can nestle in there and still enjoy our trip to Tennessee.

“The Florentine Gaze”

Florence overwhelmed me when I first entered her realm, nestled in the heart of Italy. She was at once a loud, dominant presence with her constant flow of traffic, yet she was mysteriously relaxed. To the untrained visitor, she suggested that Florentines were in a mad rush to reach their destinations; motorcycles and bicycles weaved in and out of the labyrinth of traffic and were nudged by taxi drivers to get out of their way. Traffic never seemed to stop, despite Florence’s traffic signals. It was a constant moving pattern, a wave of motion that frightened visitors to the city but failed to unnerve the locals. Because to them, it suggested a hurried ease. It was this feeling, this graciousness, I hoped to acquire while I was there taking a three week graduate course through Marshall University.

But weeks later, I sat outside on the balcony at my apartment, surrounded by a mixture of lush vegetation, fellow neighbors, and the dry rattle of Vespas, and worried that the feeling would dissipate the moment my feet touched American soil. Movement out of the corner of my eye caused me to look up. “Buongiorno,” I said to the Italian woman whose apartment was opposite and above mine. *Hello.*

The wind lifted the page of my book, and I sighed. It was almost siesta—time to close, shut down, reboot. Time to sleep. It bothered me that I found myself enjoying this lifestyle, perhaps too much because only too soon would I find myself back in America, overcome with deadlines, appointments, and moving at a pace too fast. I already found myself thinking about it—work, what needed to be done at home. My *real* life. Why couldn’t I embrace this leisurely Florentine lifestyle at home? Part of me believed that my life would be so much more relaxed, happier if I wasn’t stressed about time. Clocks were no longer important to me here, but time—

everything was based on it. There was no escape from the perpetual, never ending tick-tock, tick-tock.

The tension that had left me slowly found its way back into my shoulders and made me grimace. It would remain there for weeks, probably months to come, and the sound of the clock became even louder in my mind. Things to do. Time to go. Now, now, now.

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The city itself was described as a walking city—the cobblestone pavement and often narrow sidewalks made for both an interesting and harrowing journey, especially for someone like me who had a fear of falling. I also worried that I would fall into oncoming traffic there, but drivers tended to stop for pedestrians, tended to wait for them despite the perceived impatience to move, move, move. I remembered being in Washington, DC and New York City and that fear of being hit by oncoming traffic had not quite left me, but eventually, I fell into the Florentine rhythm and did not experience that worry as much as I did when I was in America. When the sidewalks became too narrow or too crowded with people, I confidently stepped into the streets of Florence and found myself walking down the middle of them without hesitation.

From my apartment, I walked to the Duomo, the heart of Florence; it was what my fellow wandering students and I sought when we became lost or confused on the many one way streets of the city. If we found the Duomo, we got our bearings. It was the compass we all used to move through the city. Not only did it aid in navigation, it was still one of the most impressive cathedrals Italy had to offer. It spoke to Florentines and visitors alike—whispering a tale of magnificence, beauty, and history. But the locals walked or rode past the Duomo as though it was just another place they had to navigate in order to reach their destinations. It surprised me

how they simply moved past the cathedral, without seeming to be impressed. They were not as amazed as I was with its height, its once copper façade now faded to green.

I came to Florence to enjoy it in all its splendor, from the cathedrals to the museums to the many shops and restaurants that lined the streets. The Duomo was just the beginning. I wanted to stop, to take in my surroundings because that was what I was supposed to do—not just as a student but as a tourist. Although I felt the need to see everything I could while I was there, I understood that I need to slow down. Otherwise, I would not truly appreciate the experience.

Time passed; people came and went; circumstances changed; events unfolded around us, enveloped us, and sometimes made us part of them. And we left marks. Traces that whispered we were there—in this world, that we were a part of something extraordinary. That we were extraordinary, and I wondered why they didn't embrace that idea the way I, a mere visitor to their city, did.

For me, Botticelli left his mark with his painting *The Birth of Venus*. Fascinated by the gods and goddesses in Greek & Roman mythology since I was a child, I was taken in by Venus like so many before me. Beautiful, lithe, and born from sea foam. Her only purpose, her mission it would seem, to be a harbinger of love. And like Botticelli, I found Venus mysterious and alluring as she perched precariously on a seashell brought forth from the sea. What did her eyes say as mortals attended her, bringing her into the folds of a robe, to cover her nudity as she emerged slick and newly born of foam? She looked to the voyeur as if to say, “I am beautiful what with my curves and lush figure.” The subtle look on the goddess's face suggested she was one who knew the strength of her own beauty; she was woman, goddess. She was all knowing. All powerful. Certain in her purpose. It was a song she sang in that smile, small enough on her

lips to be timid but sure enough to be knowing. She was mystery. I longed for that confidence in myself; sometimes it came to me unbidden, but other times, it lurked on the edges and waited.

Until Florence, I had never gazed upon Botticelli's original—only copies like the one that hung suspended in my bedroom. His mark was there—in the strokes of his brush, in the brilliant shades of pink and green. His mark was on me—in my heart. His mark was beauty brought forth in those vibrant colors that swirled together on canvas to create sea foam and the gossamer shroud to cover to Venus.

Many days later, I found myself at the Uffizi Gallery, and once I learned that Botticelli's works were there, I immediately began to search for them. At least five rooms of the Uffizi had been dedicated to Botticelli and his work and housed here in Florence was his masterpiece: *The Birth of Venus*, and I was determined to see it. Unlike some of the other galleries that I had visited throughout the city, the Uffizi had an elevator. I determined to take it to the top and work my way down, stopping in Botticelli's rooms. If I had to take stairs, I would have—just to see that masterpiece before me.

And when I finally encountered that mystery, I was overcome. My hand flew up to my mouth, and I said to my housemate, Michelle, "There it is." Michelle was a fellow Marshall student, an undergraduate, about twenty years my junior. She was at once quirky and bright, with a quick sense of humor and already one hell of a writer.

Tears came unbidden and filled my eyes as I walked into the room, and for a moment, I wondered what the other tourists must think of me—a grown woman standing in front of Botticelli's work, overwrought and crying. My reaction to Venus was the same as it was when I heard Josè Carreras sing when he performed in Columbus, Ohio some years ago. The music

combined with the soft tenor of his voice moved me to my core, and I found myself struggling to keep my tears silent. This was no different.

Together, Michelle and I sat on a bench in front of the painting. We waited while the tourists passed the painting; some stopped and gave it its due. Others moved on to his other work—always moving on to the next destination. They seemed to always be rushing; the tick-tock, tick-tock of the clock urged them on. They had to see everything; take in everything. Could these movers ever really give these works their due? But not me, not Michelle. We sat; we stared; we admired, and we cried—both of us. *English nerds*, Michelle called us, *crying over a work of art*. Was it wrong to feel so strongly about a mere painting? No, because art, just like literature or a song, told a story—whether it was in the painting itself or in how the art came to be. It was the details, the story that interested me as well as the work itself. And perhaps this work spoke to me because mythology helped shape my love of literature when I was a child, and besides, I had a story to tell myself. I loved (and still do) those stories of old, and to see one of them represented in Botticelli's work made me smile a smile similar to the one Venus herself had in the painting.

I relished that time with the Botticelli; I ignored those around me, hustling and bustling to get to the next room, the next famous painting. I embraced the beauty and the subtle use of lines and color. I took my time. I paused. I absorbed every line and curve, and I committed it to memory. And I knew that I would never forget this moment as long as I lived.

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While I was seated at the Gusto Leo Ristorante on Via de Proconsolo in Florence, I noted that I was across from the Hotel Cavour where the man at the front desk and I had become good acquaintances. He graciously called the taxi service for me when I found that walking had just

become too much. He didn't have to call, but he did, and I was always grateful for his willingness to help a tired American. I told him so the last day I saw him. He smiled, half embarrassed I think because I was praising him, and said, "Prego." *You're welcome.* To him, perhaps he hadn't done anything special, but to me—someone who had found herself not wanting to make the forty-five minute trek back to the apartment—he was extraordinary. If I annoyed him, he never let on. He simply smiled behind his wire-rimmed glasses and said, "The taxi will be here in three minutes. You are welcome to wait here if you would like." I always declined to remain in the lobby and instead would wait in front of the hotel where I would watch the traffic patterns and people.

This was the first time I had dinner by myself in Florence. My roommates had ventured off, some optional hike they had agreed to attend, but I knew that my legs would not withstand the effort. I had been walking most of the day, and I was tired. Stronger after being in Florence for two weeks, but tired all the same. I opted for an early dinner and then a taxi back to the apartment.

This was also the first time I felt completely confident in knowing where I was in Florence. It wasn't like the first night when my housemates and I tried to find the restaurant where we were having our welcome dinner. My housemate Michelle had taken a photograph of the address and the map, so we thought we knew where we were going. We didn't. We ended up on what we thought was the right street, but there was no restaurant in sight.

Michelle did what any lost tourist did. She consulted the map—a massive, detailed street map that indicated where we were supposed to be, yet we obviously were in the wrong place. My other housemate, Andrea, didn't say much. She was quiet but studied the map with Michelle and me.

Finally, we saw two women walking towards us, so I took the initiative. I didn't want to stand on a corner, consulting a map, and I didn't want to go traipsing around all over Florence without knowing where I was going. Most of all, I didn't want to be late. I hated being late, and more importantly, I hated feeling rushed and hurried as I did then.

"Mi scusi," I said. *Excuse me.*

They pointed us in the direction from which we had come, back towards the school, towards the Duomo.

"That can't be right," Michelle said as she looked at the map again. "I believe her when she said that this is where we need to go," she said and pointed at a spot on the map. "But that's going to take us right back to the school."

We stood there for a few more moments, not sure what to do. Finally, I said, "All right, girls, here's what we're going to do. We're going to go right over there and ask whoever is behind the counter to call us a taxi. We'll get the taxi driver to take us to the restaurant." Decision made. I didn't give them much time to protest because I was tired and getting crankier by the minute. I hated being lost.

We crossed the street and stepped into a pastry shop. When a man emerged from the back, I said again, "Mi scusi, but can you call a taxi for me?"

He threw up his hands and said, "No telephone. No taxi." Not rude. Just final.

"No," I said...speaking slowly and remembering to enunciate. "I don't want to use your phone. Can you," I said, holding up my cell, "call a taxi for me?"

After a few seconds and trial and error on my part, he understood that I had the number for the taxi service stored in my phone and wanted him to make the call.

"Si," he said, and just like that, he took my phone and disappeared into the back room.

I looked at Andrea and Michelle; a moment of panic overtook me. “I just gave my phone to a complete stranger, and he walked off!” But he emerged from another doorway, speaking in rapid Italian, requesting a taxi.

As soon as he finished, he handed me the phone and said, “The taxi will come in five minutes.”

We thanked him profusely and stepped outside the pastry shop to wait, but I went back and bought two pastries and gave him a tip. It was the only tip I gave to someone while I was there. He helped us when he didn’t have to do anything, and I appreciated that a lot. We all did.

When the taxi arrived, we all piled inside. I showed the driver the address, and he said, “Si, si,” and shifted gears before taking off. He made multiple turns but finally stopped at some place none of us recognized.

“Wait,” I said. “Michelle, let me see the address again.”

She gave me her phone, and I showed the address to the taxi driver a second time. “Oh no,” he said, laughing. “I looked at the address wrong.” With that, he shifted the car into drive again, and we zigzagged down another cobblestone road.

My first thought was that he and the pastry shop clerk were in this together, and that he had deliberately taken us in the wrong direction to purposely run up the meter. Why did I always think the worst of people? I wanted to give him the benefit of doubt, but I was hesitant. We were foreigners after all, and I had heard many stories about visitors to other countries being taken advantage of. But he assuaged my fears when he turned off the meter.

“No charge for my mistake,” he said.

Where did he take us? He steered his car towards the Duomo, towards the direction from which we had come, and it was then that we realized our mistake. The address was correct, but

the map Michelle had photographed was for a different event. Somehow, we thought the two were connected when they were posted on the school's billboard.

As we approached the Duomo, all of us, including the taxi cab driver, were laughing. He realized our error in addition to his own and couldn't help but join in the mirth, especially when I said, "Remember *National Lampoon's European Vacation*? Chevy Chase said, 'Look kids, Big Ben.' Well, look kids, it's the Duomo!" From that moment on, the Duomo became central to our surroundings. If we found it, we knew where we were.

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At the Gusto Leo, the waitress seated me at a table for two. Fortunately, I did not have to become someone's *second* and sit with people I didn't know, who may not have spoken English. When I traveled to England a few years ago, I had this happen but luckily was not dining alone; my friend Beth was with me.

I deliberately chose to put my back towards the door, something I never did. The restaurant was what I would call a typical, run of the mill bar and grill, similar to what the States offer. The waitress gave me a menu and disappeared. She waited behind the counter until I motioned her over to answer my questions or take my order. And as I waited for my food to be prepared, it occurred to me that I hadn't brought my usual protective gear when I went to a restaurant alone. I was not armed with a book or writing material. I didn't even take out my cell phone. Usually, I felt out of place, awkward if I was alone. I preferred having something to do besides staring at my plate or at the empty seat opposite me. I needed something to do with my time while I waited, but instead, I leaned back in the chair, breathed a deep breath, and observed what was happening around me. I enjoyed solitary excursions—with or without supplemental materials.

I overheard an English couple at the table next to me; they were on holiday. “Just two hours from Florence by train,” she told me later—after I had taken a photograph of my gnocchi alla leo. *Silly American*, she probably thought, *haven’t you ever eaten good food before?* She didn’t say that or even suggest that was what she was thinking. Instead, she and her husband talked to me about America, about slowing down and embracing the Florentine culture.

I envied their ability to just hop a train in England and arrive in Italy a mere two hours later! When I was a senior in high school, I had a pen pal from Slovenia visit me during the summer, and she was amazed that we could drive for hours on end and never leave Ohio. She talked about the convenience of trains and how easy it was to travel from one country to another, and I was jealous. How easy it would be to move around Europe, see everything it had to offer, without having to endure lengthy flights!

I ate slowly; I savored the richness of the food, and I knew that my waitress wouldn’t acknowledge me again until I signaled, until I asked her for something else. She was not like American food servers; she didn’t try to rush me as I ate. She didn’t hover or bring me a second drink before I finished the first one. She didn’t bring me the bill before she offered me dessert. Instead, she took it for granted that I would stay until I was ready to leave, and I took it for granted that she wouldn’t care when I did. She seemed disappointed that I didn’t finish my gnocchi, that I asked for the check instead of dessert, but she gave it to me and then waited patiently for me to pay. I could have stayed at the Gusto Leo as long as I wanted; it wouldn’t have mattered to her or anyone else there. What mattered to them was that I enjoyed my meal, that I left satisfied and that I would return.

Sitting outside the Duomo on what had become affectionately referred to as “Wendi’s Bench,” I watched as the painter moved towards me. He sat up his small stand just in front of me where he spent the day, every day, painting and selling his work; we made eye contact every day that I sat on the bench, and I thought he recognized me at this point. I had watched him paint three roosters the previous day while the tourists came by in twos, threes, and groups of ten or more. Today, we nodded to one other, and I continued to observe my surroundings. I found my own thoughts amidst the noise and people.

At times, I admitted to myself that I felt self-conscious while I sat there. Most of the tourists and Florentines ignored me, but on more than one occasion, I cringed as people stopped to stare at me. They tended to be Asians. Sometimes they pointed, and at least twice, they took pictures of me. I liked to think that they were taking photographs of something behind me or that they were gesturing to a statue or graffiti just beyond the bench, but I tended to believe it was me that fascinated or horrified them. Had they never seen a woman my size before? Perhaps I was an anomaly to them, something that didn’t register in their small framed minds. I joked about it with my housemates and said that it wasn’t because I was a larger woman but it was because I was so beautiful that they stopped and stared, but I would never know for certain. Not now. Not ever.

Sometimes, I engaged other English speakers in conversation. It seemed unnatural to me that I couldn’t readily understand the native language, and sometimes I felt lonely when I sat there by myself for long periods of time. I thought that this was the most difficult part of my journey in Italy—not being able to speak the language, I learned through experience. I spoke slowly, enunciated my words as well as I could, and used a lot of hand gestures. Florentines, in turn, did the same with me, and we had a lot of success in understanding each other.

Despite the occasional tourist who stopped to stare at me, I reminded myself to stop, to breathe, to embrace what was in front of me. As I sat on my bench outside the Duomo in the heart of Florence, I watched the people; it was what I liked to do most when I travelled. I made up stories about them as they passed; I tried my best though not to stare at them the way I felt I had been stared at. I gazed at one and then another and then shifted my attention somewhere else, observing but conscious about being considered rude. Direct eye contact, especially for long periods of time, is considered rude in some cultures, so I tried to remember where I was and that I was encountering many people from many different places.

The tourists mingled with Florentines, eating gelato or buying scarves from the many vendors who set up their wares every day, all day. Minimal traffic moved along the stretch of road before the Duomo; horse drawn carriages, bicycles, the occasional Vespa, emergency or police vehicles, and the random taxi weaved among the pedestrians who struggled to take that perfect picture. It was a loud place, teeming with multiple languages, wailing sirens, and the blowing wind.

The Duomo reminded me that I was in an ancient city, a city much older than even my own country, and that I should relish the magnificence of the architecture and people before me. So I sat back on my bench and watched. I relaxed. I yawned occasionally and found it difficult to keep my eyes open, so I wrote in my journal that I tended to carry with me on such occasions. It was probably best not to fall asleep on a bench in Florence, on a bench anywhere. I stretched, shifted positions and watched the artist in front of me continue to paint. He worked most of the day, stopping now and then to talk to other artists and tourists when they stopped at his stand. Before leaving the city days later, I would buy a painting from him—just a small memento of my time in Florence.

But, as the weeks here in Florence passed, to my regret, I still found it somewhat difficult to fully squelch the tick-tocking of my brain. I had slowed down since I arrived; I relished the time I lingered over meals in restaurants with young women, my roommates, who had become good friends; I meandered among the scarves or fruit in the Duomo marketplace and didn't fret when I paused among the stands. The vendors didn't mind. They weren't in a hurry to finalize a sale; instead, they let me look, take my time, decide.

When I returned to my apartment, I opened the windows and took a siesta after failing to keep my eyes open as I read. And later, I awoke—to the hum of a Vespa, the chatter of birds, the often vibrant language of the Florentines who passed beneath my window, and it was then that I remembered that I was going home in just a few days. When I did, I wondered what my life would be like. Would I be able to continue this subtle, slowed lifestyle? Would I find myself bristling when the food server hovered at my table or brought my check before I had even asked to see a dessert menu? Would I lose patience with people who wanted things right then, no waiting? Worse yet—would I find myself becoming like that again? Would I find myself taking things for granted, being rushed and harried along from one event to another, without fully embracing my experiences? If Florence had taught me anything (and I hoped she had), it was that I needed to slow down, not rush, and enjoy the experiences whatever they were. I would appreciate my life much, much more if I learned to take siesta from time to time, and simply embrace what was in front of me.

When we left our Florentine apartment on that last morning in Italy, I was apprehensive. We had been told that we didn't need to be at the airport any sooner than an hour before our flight departed because the airport was small. What we didn't plan for was the line. The

Lufthansa counter was flooded with people; there was no way we could check our luggage, get our boarding passes, go through security, and be at our gate on time. No way. And I had no intention of running through an airport. I was not one of those people, and I didn't want to become one then.

"I knew we should have come earlier," I said to Michelle as we got our boarding passes at one of the kiosks before moving into the Lufthansa line to check our bags.

She nodded in agreement before voicing her own concerns.

The line hardly moved at all. Eventually, the rest of my classmates joined us in line where we waited until one of the Lufthansa workers learned that our flight left at one o'clock, and it was already after noon. She opened a new line and ushered us ahead of the many others who were waiting, just like we had been, to get boarding passes and luggage checked. That didn't speed up the process much, but I felt somewhat comforted when she said, "Once you have checked your luggage, 'they' will know you are here and will hold the plane."

And she told the truth.

We were literally the last ones to board the flight before the crew closed the doors, and I knew that we would be pressing our luck once we arrived in Munich. That intensity, that need to be somewhere at a certain time came back with a ferocity, and I found myself looking at my watch over and over again, worried that we would miss the next leg of our flight and what that might mean. Time was against us...if only we had left earlier that morning.

Glancing over at Michelle who was seated next to me, I shook my head. The tick-tock, tick-tock that dictated my life back in the States might, with a little luck and a lot of determination, go quiet from time to time and I could become Florentine once more, but right

then, I had to think about getting through the Munich airport and security before I could think about siesta and not feeling rushed. Time...everything depended on it...once again.

When I did return home, that incessant ticking didn't go away. It won't ever, really. I know that now. I know too that the people of Florence have their own stressors and are just as motivated (or commanded) by time as I am. What I need to do (and as often as I can) is turn off or disconnect from the technology that surrounds me, and when I do, I need to focus on me. I need to carve that time out for myself, make it a habit, just like other things I do every day that I don't think about. If I can do that, I know that I will be one step closer to becoming the person I want to be.

Still, there is no escape from the perpetual, never ending tick-tock, tick-tock. The tension has slowly found its way back into my shoulders and made me grimace. And I know it will remain there for weeks, months, possibly years to come, and the sound of the clock will become even louder in my mind. Things to do. Time to go. Now, now, now. Will it ever end? Only if I make a conscious effort...and make it happen. For me. For my sanity. For my family and friends.

“The Hen Party”

I’m single, and I am fine with that, most of the time. But that means when I go to a wedding it’s just me. And that’s fine as long as I’m at the wedding itself. It’s when the reception takes place that I’m most uncomfortable. Admittedly, I’m all right with being single—most of the time, except in moments like this. Couples take to the dance floor and sway back and forth as the music moves them closer and closer together, and I’m left at the table with my second piece of cake or another glass of booze. It’s times like that I feel a pang deep in my chest that makes it difficult to breathe, and I tell myself that I shouldn’t feel so overcome with loneliness that I burst into tears. It’s okay to cry at weddings, but what reason could I have to cry at the reception? I don’t need that kind of attention, and after all, that day isn’t about me. But I still feel it, a snag at first when the first slow song plays, and then the weight of being single pulls that snag further, making it fuller. Irreparable.

I usually recover well enough to remind myself that I don’t dance in public because I don’t dance *well*, but slow songs are different. And when someone asks me, on that rare occasion, I will dance. Most of the time, I watch everyone else, and that’s something that I like doing anyway—watching people. But when the love songs start to play or I see couples whispering words of love in each other’s ears as they move, then being single *sucks*.

Being single also sucks when it comes time for the bouquet to be thrown. I don’t know who came up with that tradition, but it gets a bit embarrassing when I’m the only single *woman* who steps forward with several twelve year olds. Really. I don’t know which is worse: being a single woman of forty who has never been married or being so young that I shouldn’t even hope to catch the bouquet.

When I attended my friend Renee's wedding several years ago, she actually handed me the bouquet instead of tossing it. She said, "I want Wendi to have it." Did she think that I shouldn't rely on luck and that she should help me in any way she could? I don't know if I should have been insulted, thinking that she felt sorry for me, or that I should I have been happy, happy that she wanted me to fall in love, just as she had. Catching those flowers didn't take though. I didn't expect it to, really. I've been told that I'm too picky, that my expectations are too high. Why shouldn't I have high expectations for the person I'm meant to be with for the rest of my days? What's wrong with being picky? I've seen too many friends and family members choose the wrong people. They settle because they don't want to be alone. I don't want to be alone either, but I'll be damned if I will compromise what I need in a relationship. I can be just as alone with someone as I can by myself, especially if we don't share common interests or goals.

So when my friend Heather's grandfather passed away, she said that his passing made her realize the importance of having the people who matter most with her on her wedding day, so she asked me to come. Of course, I said I would even though I'm not comfortable at weddings or any formal gatherings, really; fortunately, my friend Beth was willing to go too. She is also single, so during the reception (if dancing takes place), we can sit together and observe those on the dance floor. If she is asked to dance, I will happily watch her purse and do my best to ignore the sappy music oozing from the speakers surrounding us.

It may be that I will always be single, but it's these rare moments when I would feel better having a partner.

Heather's sister Alison made arrangements to have Heather's bachelorette (or *hen*) party at the National Harbor in Maryland last November, and although I hesitated about the expense I would incur, I agreed to go. Beth and I both did. Alison's plan was simple: an overnight excursion at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, complete with an afternoon at the Relache Spa, followed by dinner at McLoone's Pier House at the National Harbor.

Although I wasn't too happy about the cost—it seemed terribly expensive for just an overnight adventure—I wanted to support and celebrate Heather's upcoming nuptials, so I packed a bag and jumped into Beth's Prius. Well, I didn't jump, but I climbed into her car, ready to begin the journey.

I always hesitate about riding in other people's cars, especially if I sit in the front seat, because seatbelts don't always fit me. I know I should wear a seatbelt in the back seat too, but I don't most of the time. I don't know why. One place is just as dangerous as the other, I guess, if I was involved in a wreck. So when I buy a new car, I insist on having a seat belt extension simply because I know I will need at least an inch or two more in order to be truly comfortable. When I travel with someone else, I don't have this luxury and have to hope that the seatbelt will fit with relatively little trouble. This usually isn't the case, so if there are more than just me and the driver in the car, I will opt for the back seat. Legally, I'm not obligated to wear a seatbelt back there.

That's what always gets me about my size. I always need about an inch or two more. Not much more than that. I'm not standard size, not by any means, so standard accommodations don't often apply. If I can find a way to adjust, to make myself comfortable, I do. I used to hesitate, be embarrassed, and wouldn't say anything. As I've matured and become more

comfortable with myself, I am more at ease advocating for my needs. After all, if I don't do it, who will?

I drive a Jeep Compass, and I learned a few weeks ago that my seatbelt extension will work not only in Beth's Prius but in a Honda as well. Good news for me if I need to sit up front; otherwise, my friends will have to pretend they're in the film *Driving Ms. Wendi*. When they don't drive, I do. It's just easier that way, and I don't have to worry about not being safe or breaking the law. It's a win-win. Whether I was in the front or the back of Beth's Prius, I could be safe, and that made me happy.

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After driving part way, we stopped for the night at a hotel. But the next day we set out, bright and early. The weather cooperated, but it was cold. So cold that even I wore my jacket. I have a tendency to go without most days. The wind had a bite that caused my face to sting and my eyes to water. I knew though that if we had to do any amount of walking that night I wouldn't wear a jacket. I didn't want to be too warm, and I definitely would be if we walked from the resort to the restaurant. And that was the plan. Already, I was already thinking about that walk—how long it would be from one place to the other, how fast the others would walk, if I would be trailing behind them. If I anticipate, then I can prepare.

The Gaylord Resort and Convention Center is located in the hub of the National Harbor, and it is enormous. In addition to plush rooms, it houses the Relache Salon and Spa, numerous restaurants and boutiques, and the Pose Lounge on the 18th floor that offers a panorama view of the harbor and the city surrounding it. When we stepped out onto the walkway later that night, city lights streaked the night and voices rose up to meet us from where pedestrians walked to and from the Gaylord. The wind danced in conjunction to the fast paced rhythms animating from the

lounge itself and tore its way through our clothes. The view was breathtaking but one that we didn't enjoy too long because it was so, so cold. And I, for one, didn't have a jacket, by choice.

After unloading our gear, we went in search of the lobby, and I silently growled about the length of the walk. From the car to the main door of the Gaylord and then to the main lobby was a hike, especially when I was hauling everything, a back pack, my purse, luggage. The rest of the ladies had no trouble managing the distance without becoming breathless. I, on the other hand, was hoofing it and became very aware of my size and just how out of shape I really was.

I tell myself that being out of breath and having flushed cheeks is because I have a smaller stride than my friends and that I walk slower than they do. That is true on one hand, but on the other, and as the day progressed, I would become more and more aware that I didn't just have a smaller stride but I was also (and still am) a fat chick who was having trouble keeping up with her friends' pace. My theory is that as long as I can see my comrades I don't have to walk at their pace, and I knew that when we were out later that night that they wouldn't abandon me if I was lagging behind. They are good about that. (In fact, last year when Heather and I visited Alison in Washington, D.C., the two of them stopped when I needed them to, kept pace with my stride, and let me take my time when we toured the monuments and museums throughout the city.)

I know that my weight continually holds me back; it keeps me from doing everything that I want to do. I find myself resisting going somewhere or doing something because I know what kind of *hikes* might be involved, and I don't want to be the one who is out of breath, who can't keep up, who needs to stop. Yet I am, and I will be until I learn how to control my eating. I have to decide right now if having this weigh, if holding onto it all, is worth what I'm giving up. I know it isn't, but I'm afraid. I'm afraid to change. This is what I know. This is what I am.

And what if that *me* goes away? Who will I be then? And why does it scare me so much to find out?

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To me, the lobby was the size of a football field, but I walked the length of it, breathing in and out rapidly through my nose as I tried to keep up. Alison secured our rooms while the rest of us waited, and I watched the people. There were people everywhere; many with children who had come to see the Holidays on Ice Display. They weaved in and out of the many Christmas trees that lined the lobby or stopped long enough to pose for pictures and take in the expansive setting. I had to admit that it was pretty, but what I noticed was the many women who pulled their luggage behind them. Not one of them looked as harried as I did or as out of breath. Not one of them had broken a sweat from the lengthy walk. Why was I was the only one who pulled her jacket off and tried to control the rapid beating of my heart while we waited? I envied them just as I envied my friends. I felt uncomfortable and out of place. I didn't belong here with all of these comfortable, relaxed people.

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Silver handled, glass doors separated me from the Relache Spa and Salon. When I stepped inside, I glanced over my shoulder as I approached the counter. Large, white chairs sat opposite, separated by a table that housed a carafe of water with lemon for parched visitors to enjoy. The floor was tiled, also a slick artsy white like the chairs. Accents of gray and black and various plants set the scene. It looked like something out of a movie, very posh and lavish.

“I have an appointment at three o'clock,” I said to the attendant who greeted me. “My name is Wendi Kozma.”

She punched something on her computer and said, “All right, Ms. Wendi. Just have a seat and your hostess will be with you in a minute.”

My hostess? “Thank you,” I said and sat down.

Linda and I didn’t wait long before our hostess arrived. She gave us a tour of the facility: the locker room where we would change into robes and slippers, the lounge where we could wait until our appointments got underway, the sauna, the hot tub, and the steam room. It was very, very posh indeed.

But my concern was the robe and slippers. Did they have a robe big enough for me? If they didn’t, that was fine. I deliberately wore comfortable clothes, pants that I could roll up, so I could improvise. That wasn’t a problem.

When our hostess opened up the locker that had been assigned to me, I said, “I’m not sure if the robe will work for me.” But without any hesitation, she said that she thought it would be fine, but if it wasn’t, I needed to let her know and that we could try a different one. I realized then that Alison, Heather’s sister, had probably talked with the spa and provided information relating to size. I thought that was extremely considerate of her—of the spa, that they would want to make this a pleasant experience for everyone, no matter the size.

The robe was a 4X. Unfortunately, like everything else, it was not big enough. I silently cursed but thought perhaps they carried a 5X, and I would be fine. *I would be comfortable; I would be like all the other women I saw* coming and going in the spa. I wouldn’t feel set apart; I wouldn’t feel different.

Our hostess brought a different robe; it didn’t work either. This one wasn’t white and plush like the first one, but black. It was a man’s robe. Inwardly, I cringed because I had an immediate flashback to childhood—having a different uniform than the other members of my

high school band because the largest one available wasn't big enough for me, I had to have the uniform altered anyway because I was too short for the pants and jacket to fit properly. Part of me realized in that moment that I didn't want to be different; I wanted to be like everyone else. So why couldn't the spa have a robe just one size larger?

If I was able to house myself in a robe, just like the other women's, I still didn't know if I would be okay. It was a complicated mess, feeling like I wanted to fit in but knowing that whether or not the robe fit, I would still be *different*. I was the largest woman in the spa. I was certainly felt like I was the largest woman in the entire Gaylord Resort. I felt like that gal in *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*. Too big and out of place. This was me; I made myself feel this way all the time even though I knew that the women coming and going at Relache were about as interested in me and my feelings of insecurity as they were about the lounge where we would wait until our spa sessions began.

I often wonder if that feeling of being out of place will leave if I lose weight. I know that as the pounds decrease I become more confident, more sure of myself. I carry myself differently. I am a lot happier. I don't fret so much about distance or whether or not I will be comfortable at a restaurant or movie theatre. So why in the hell do I hold back? Why do I yo-yo, gaining and losing, losing and gaining? Am I like some of my relatives who enjoy being miserable? Am I really miserable, or do I like being this way? Do I like being the biggest gal in the room, on the plane, at the spa? My size draws attention to me, or at least I think it does. Do I worry then that if I'm of average weight that I won't be noticed? That I won't stand out? That I will just be another woman? Sometimes I think that's my fear—not so much that I will change but that no one will *see* me.

As it was, a robe of a different color or no robe at all, I was still standing out. For now. And this robe, like the other one, was too small. I returned it to our hostess and said, “This one doesn’t work either.” To my surprise, she acted more upset about the robe not fitting than I did. She kept apologizing, and I found myself saying, “It’s okay, really. I have on comfortable clothes, so it won’t be any trouble to just push my pants up above my knees for the pedicure. Really, no, really it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

I told myself I didn’t want to undress and hang out in a robe anyway. I felt much more comfortable in my clothes. Right. Sometimes, I tell myself a lie so often that I think I will begin to believe it. In some cases, anyway, I hope I do believe it, that I’m not different, that I’m like everyone else. Most of the time, I don’t though. I just try to make the best of the situation so I was determined to enjoy the Relache Spa whether I was in an overstuffed robe or not.

Pedicure seats are awkward for anyone, but especially for a fat chick. The whole contraption (chair and foot spa) is a crazy combination that can be adjusted if necessary to move forward or backward, depending on the client’s height (and size, in my case). And sitting right up against the foot spa was the pedicurist’s cart that held all of her potential torture devices for my toes.

The chair was wide enough for me to be comfortable, but the attached foot spa coupled with the cart proved to be problematic as I tried to swing my legs up and over them to put my feet in the rolling, hot water. Initially, I didn’t think that I could get my legs up that high. And as I tried to swing them over, bumping the cart and feeling more and more awkward, I felt my size, the full weight of me in the flush of my face. I wanted to have the full spa experience, but here I was, presented with another obstacle.

Being fat is an obstacle too. Although I try to make sure it doesn't impede me, it does. Every day, I think about distance—how long is the walk to and from my car when I park in the parking garage or surface lot at Marshall? How many steps is it to my classroom when I'm teaching at Daymar College? How close can I park to the entrance when I go to the grocery store so that I'm not out of breath or look too harried when I get there? When I was in Italy several months ago, I worked up to walking forty-five minutes to and from my apartment to the school. Initially, I couldn't do that without stopping to rest after a few minutes, but eventually, I could make the trek without a break and got there in a reasonable amount of time for someone who walks at the speed I do. But I still think about it, distance, I mean. All the time.

And although I managed to get myself situated in the chair, I then turned my thoughts to what I would need to do to get *out* of the chair.

It's funny how things like that are always in the back of my head. That...and if I can fit comfortably into a seat. And I don't want to think about those things. I don't want those concerns to prevent me from going somewhere or doing something that I really want to do, like going to my friend's hen party in Washington, D.C. What do thinner, more in shape people think about? Do they have worries similar to mine? I know that friends of mine who aren't overweight don't normally think about things like how far it is from Point A to Point B or if they will be comfortable when they go to dinner. These kinds of things often dictate my thoughts, and it's been hard for me to admit this...I hate that.

By the time my manicure was finished, I had very little time to actually get ready before dinner. Dinner was supposed to take place at seven-thirty, and it was already well past six. Very little time to wash and fix my hair, change my clothes, and get to the hotel bar to meet the rest of the group. I wasn't so concerned about that, but again, my mind was on the distance between

McLoone's Pier House and the Gaylord. I didn't want to be late, and I didn't want to cause the others to be late. What if we didn't get there because I was too slow to keep up and the group waited on me? Would our reservation be held?

The walk to McLoone's was less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile, but it felt further than that to me. It was cold, and the wind coming off the harbor made it much worse. 34 mile-per-hour wind was enough to make even me walk as quickly as I could, but I couldn't keep up with the others. Before long, I had fallen behind; again, my motto was as long as I could see them, I was fine. And I could.

We arrived at 7:23 PM. Minutes to spare. I was out of breath and my back hurt, a sure sign that I hadn't continued my walking regime from Italy. Italy was supposed to be the turning point, what spurred me to being healthier, yet I resumed the same activities, the same bad habits when I returned. It's easy to fall into that trap, again and again. It's much easier to go back to what I know than to do something that's less familiar.

I admit that I don't like change, and I don't like doing something that is hard. Who does? I'm not, nor have I ever been, someone who likes a challenge. It's not supposed to be easy; otherwise, it wouldn't be a challenge, right? I don't like to struggle to solve or sort something out. It's much easier to be complacent, to do what I know. There's comfort in that, even if it isn't what is best for me.

I can recognize triggers or what makes me return to what I know, yet I don't do anything to stop them from having the same effect on me again and again and again. Change scares me, and when I'm confronted with it whether I'm at work or thinking about my eating habits, I revert back to what I know because it's safe.

During dinner, my thoughts kept turning to the walk back to the Gaylord. It wasn't that far in distance, but it was all uphill. I wasn't looking forward to that, not at all. I smiled and chatted with everyone, and I enjoyed a delicious meal, but that walk in my very near future was gnawing at me. I didn't want to do it, and despite the short distance, I knew I would hail a taxi if one was available. Anyone who wanted could join me, but I didn't want to walk. It was too hard.

Yes, I admit that I have no qualms about doing what is easier, but a lot of people are like that. Easier is better, but not always. The sooner I get that in my thick skull, the better. Walking back to the hotel did indeed prove to be difficult. When we left, Beth and I were walking together, but not for long. The wind whipped around us, lashing at our faces and hands, and nearly tore me out of my sweater. Cold and blustery, right. Blustery, granted; how about damn near freezing?

The Gaylord loomed in the distance; its bright lights beckoned. Warmth waited for us there and rest, too. I moved as fast as I could, but eventually, predictably, I fell behind. I couldn't blame Beth or the others for not waiting on me; it was too cold. Besides, I knew where I was going, and the harbor district was very well lit. I wasn't concerned for my safety per se. I was more worried about the fact that the cold air was getting down in my lungs, and I was beginning to wheeze like someone who had asthma. And my lower back was hurting. I needed to sit down, but there was nowhere to sit. No benches. Not even a rail or something to lean against. Nothing. I was on my own.

I walked as far as I could, staring hard at the Gaylord, willing it to come closer to me, and then I stopped. I had to. Despite the wind, I had to rest even if it was just for a few moments.

Breathing deeply, getting more cold air in my lungs, I pushed ahead...only to walk so far and stop again. And again. Going down to McLoone's was easy compared to this.

Finally, tired, cold, and struggling for control of my breath, I walked into the Gaylord where Beth and Linda stood waiting for me. Because they had time, Heather and Alison had gone to the restroom. Immediately, I found myself on what looked like a plush, overstuffed fainting couch. At that moment, the way I felt, I thought I could faint. Not really. I'm being a bit overdramatic, but I was so tired that all I wanted to do was sit there. I didn't want to move. Not for some time, at least.

We wandered up to the Pose Lounge for a few minutes and then back down to the National Harbor Sports Bar where Linda, Alison, and I had lunch earlier that day. There, we resumed our celebration and chatted long after the lights flashed off, indicating the bar was closing for the night.

I made my way back to my room and fell into bed without much thought, except one: *I needed to do something about my weight.*

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As I write this essay weeks later, I can acknowledge that I haven't done anything differently. I still eat the same, exercise very little, and lament the fact that I am a fat chick. Being fat, like being single, bothers me. Sometimes more often than I care to admit. I worry about my health, and I worry about being different. Why do I fear that so much, being different, especially when I can admit to myself that I would like to think about the destination itself as opposed to how I'm going to get there?

I can talk a good talk, but I don't practice what I preach. I say things like, "I need to exercise more. I know that I need to control my portions. I know that I should do something

else instead of eat when I'm confronted with an emotional situation." I recognize this inability. I don't do anything about it beyond the recognition.

I tell myself that I will start taking control of my life tomorrow. What a cliché. Tomorrow doesn't come, or when it does for me, it is like the day before. I do know this; I don't want to be the one lagging behind anymore. I want to be the one leading the way, and the only way to do that is to move beyond just making plans.

I have the support that I need to become a healthier, better me. Friends, family, and coworkers even, will encourage me, help me, and praise me. I've considered talking to a professional about this fear I have of change and how I can overcome it, but I haven't sought out that kind of help. Not yet. I have to believe that this fear of losing myself on this journey is just that—a fear, that I will still be the Wendi people recognize. If I'm not, I trust that they will call me on it. They will remind me that the old Wendi is still there; she's just in a new, modified version.

Size, distance, needing just an inch or two—none of it will be relative. No longer. I've grown too comfortable in this skin, so comfortable that I'm uncomfortable. I don't like being that way, so it's time to step out of my comfort zone and lead the charge. And what I will learn, *I suspect*, is that the only thing that is relative is me.

Appendix



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Office of Research Integrity

March 7, 2014

Wendi L. Kozma
106 Benner Avenue-Pyro
Oak Hill, OH 45656

Dear Ms. Kozma:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "Travel Sized." After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bruce F. Day". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'y'.

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director

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Works Cited

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- Kozma, Wendi. "Travel Sized: A Collection of Essays." MA thesis. Marshall University, 2014. Print.
- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. Print.
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