The Places that Became Home: a Collection of Short Stories and Memories

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Claremont McKenna College

The Places that Became Home: a Collection of Short Stories and Memories

submitted to
Professor Mark Andrejevic

by
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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of short stories and memories from the eight places that I have lived. Through these stories and memories, I reflect on themes of identity and community. I also consider the idea of home: what defines a home, how we make a place feel like a home, and what transforms a city or a town into a home. Each chapter also includes my own original designs and photographs.

The stories about Sharon and Westwood, small towns in Massachusetts, focus on childhood and familial relationships. The narratives about St. Louis, Missouri and Toluca Lake, California, consider the transition from childhood to adulthood. Meanwhile, the memories from Claremont, California, Silver Lake, California and Santa Monica, California all meditate on the idea of belonging. Lastly, the recollections from London, England, contemplate how a foreign city can become a home.
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During the first twenty-one years of my life, I moved eight times, living in eight different “homes.” This reality may not seem too peculiar, except that only one of these moves was with my family. These moves were inspired by a desire to explore and to learn about myself while simultaneously pursuing my academic and career goals. My mom diagnosed me with the “travel bug,” as my younger sister suggested that I had “commitment issues.” While I may not agree with either of them, I recognize that settling in a town or city—a “home”—for a long period of time makes me feel restless, no matter how happy I feel in that place.

I grew up in Massachusetts, spending the first five years of my life in one tiny town before I moved to an even tinier town, Westwood, where I lived for the rest of my childhood. In Westwood, everyone knew everyone. You ran into your soccer coach at the grocery store or your friend’s mom at the Starbucks and you had to stop and chat with neighbors when you went out for jogs. You attended every Friday night home football game at Flahive Field, and in high school you got to join “The Den,” the rowdy Wolverine fan section. If you were a true fan, you drove down Route 109 towards Holliston or Hopkinton, painting two W’s on your cheeks and standing in the visiting section.

I loved the Westwood community, but like many kids growing up in a small town, I dreamt of something bigger. While I sometimes imagined big cities and tall skyscrapers and bustling streets, my dreams always centered on California: mild winters and palm trees and pale blue lifeguard huts facing the sea.

My peers from Westwood never moved too far away from our town of 14,000. Most attended college near Boston while some ventured to other areas of New England.
The few that needed to board airplanes to travel to their colleges were considered wild and daring. Moving to St. Louis to attend Washington University, I was among these few. While I wasn’t living my California dream, I was leaving Westwood, the Boston area, and the East Coast. I wanted to be a writer and Wash U was known for its fiction and poetry programs. The move from the East Coast to the Midwest seemed drastic enough.

They say St. Louis is the “Gateway to the West,” the Arch sculpture representing a transition from one side of the country to the other. I was surprised by how quickly I fell in love with the city of St. Louis: the friendly residents, the dynamic music scene, the countless restaurants and green parks. Still, I remained distracted and tempted by my dream of California. Eventually, I wanted to work in the movie business and I felt too far away, too disconnected.

My quest to work in movies would lead me to transfer to Claremont McKenna in Southern California and inspire me to spend two summers working as an intern in Los Angeles—St. Louis truly was my “gateway” to the West Coast. I felt most myself during those summers in L.A., yet my “homes” during those times were so temporary, short term leases never longer than eight weeks. Sublets or “corporate housing,” which I came to learn meant boring furniture but countless other young people just trying to “make it” in Hollywood. As Aviezer Tucker, a philosopher and social scientist explains in “In Search of Home,” the “home” is not always expected or obvious: “As much as one’s particular personality is individual and unique, so is one’s particular home, where one’s personality may fulfill itself” (Tucker 184). In this way, the “home” becomes personal and distinct, meaning something different for everyone.
If I felt far away during my time in Los Angeles, I became even more distanced from my childhood home when I moved to London to study at University College London (UCL) for a semester. While the flight from Boston to London was only an hour longer than the flight to Los Angeles, my semester in the United Kingdom introduced me to an entirely different culture. How could I make this foreign land feel like home? What is home? How do we define a home? What transforms a place or a city into a home?

These are ideas that I consider throughout my reflections on the places that I have lived. To prepare to write these reflections, I read several articles and books about the idea of home and deriving meaning from a place. I also read short stories and memoirs, including Patti Smith’s *Just Kids* and *M Train*, Drew Barrymore’s *Wildflower*, Mary Karr’s *Lit* and *The Art of the Memoir*, and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*. I have included a full, annotated reading list at the end of my stories.

Reading these articles and memoirs while writing about my own experiences, I came to realize that we do not need to define home as one house, one city, or one place. For example, Patti Smith lives in neighborhoods throughout New York City as she pursues her artistic goals while Mary Karr experiences life in California, Texas, Minnesota and Cambridge as she writes poetry and struggles with alcoholism. Drew Barrymore leaves the traditional family home at age fourteen when she becomes emancipated from her mother. Meanwhile, Cheryl Strayed finds a greater sense of identity and self-acceptance when she begins a nomadic lifestyle, hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, through California, Oregon and Washington State.

As Mary Douglas writes in “The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space,” the home “is not always a localizable idea” as it “is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed
space. It does not need bricks and it can be a wagon, a caravan, a boat or a tent” (Douglas 289). Aviezer Tucker echoes Douglas: “People, unlike trees and bushes are not ‘rooted’—people are born with legs. The fact that we are born with legs and intelligence opens to us ever new spatial and intellectual horizons” (Tucker 186). This means that when our home does not represent our personalities or when we feel restless, we can choose to relocate—we can seek a new home.

Despite my restlessness and my tendency to move, I find a sense of nostalgia for my former homes, places that became familiar and meaningful. Barbara Cassin considers this idea in her work, “Nostalgia.” In this text, Cassin breaks down the word nostalgia, introducing it as a Swiss-German word, “made up of ‘nostros,’ ‘return’ and ‘algos,’ ‘pain,’ ‘suffering’ (Cassin 5). She suggests that “nostalgia is the ‘pain of return,’ both the suffering that has a hold on you when you are far away and the pains you must endure to return” (Cassin 5). In this way, Cassin argues that returning to a former home or place can provoke feelings of longing or sadness.

Cassin’s ideas certainly resonated with me as I wrote my reflections. Although perhaps I felt most myself living in Los Angeles, there were certainly times when I longed for my kitchen table or backyard in Westwood. Similarly, while I appreciated the opportunity to study abroad in London, I sometimes found myself dreaming about the palm tree-lined streets of West Hollywood, the hiking trails of Malibu and foggy Saturday mornings at Venice Beach.

Finding a home that fits our personalities proves important because the home is the space to which we return consistently. Irene Cieraad, a cultural anthropologist at TU Delft, claims that, “the home is still the focal point of most people’s lives” (Cieraad 11).
After work or school, most individuals return to the space of the home to relax, to eat dinner and to sleep. Although individuals may feel pressure to behave in a certain way in the office or the classroom, the home should represent an escape from societal expectations, a place where one can truly embrace his or her unique identity.
SHARON
4 Tanglewood Road
August 1994-August 1999
Sharon is a series of faded memories, pieces of the past that come to mind whenever I think of the tiny Massachusetts town where I spent the first five years of my life.

I remember my pink bicycle with the training wheels, riding it up and down the driveway and sitting in the grassy patch by the mailbox when I got too tired to pedal anymore. The field at the end of the street where my neighborhood friend, Julie, and I spent hours searching for bright yellow dandelions and four leaf clovers. The dance studio where I learned tap and ballet and hip-hop. And “the lake,” my favorite summertime spot, wading in the warm water in a pair of water-wings, making drip castles in the sand and waiting in line for popsicles at the snack-stand.

And then there’s the home itself. My memory swears that it was painted yellow but photos of me standing outside a brown house in the snow show me otherwise. I remember the swing set, learning how to “pump” and spending hours on the pale blue slide. And of course the deck outside where I sat with my parents when I was supposed to be asleep, staring up at the stars in the sky.

“Which one’s the Little Dipper?” and “is that Orion’s belt?”

My blue room and piles of paperback books and always a story before bed. Drawings of cats and flowers done in crayon or colored pencils hung on the wall, interrupted with the occasional blurry watercolor. I had assumed I’d be an artist, spending my days in front of an easel,
capturing the colorful dynamic of the New England seasons. I liked to paint the autumn leaves and the sunset over “the lake”—lots of shades of purple and orange.

Of course these aspirations shifted countless times. Artist became teacher and teacher became ice-skating instructor. Then ice-skating instructor became dancer and that one stuck—at least for a few years.

It was during that time that I truly embraced my Leo persona. I loved being on stage during recitals, spinning and spinning under the bright lights. I posed for pictures in my tutu and ballet slippers and led my younger sister, Jenn, in dance routines at home: in the kitchen while my mom cooked penne, on the deck as my parents sipped beers and watched the sun set and in the living room while Dragon Tails or Arthur played in the background. I don’t think anyone would’ve guessed that my elementary school teachers would later label me as “shy” and “quiet.”

Once I’d exhausted myself performing pirouettes and plies around the house, I’d insist on watching old recital videos. Jenn often joined me, shouting and pointing when my group of three and four year-olds stepped on the stage in our bright yellow lion costumes. I hardly remember the actual performance, yet the video and those moments with Jenn stick in my mind.

The recital began with the youngest students, meaning that I got to see my own performance first. Still, I watched the entire two hour video countless times (much to the amusement of my parents and babysitters), imagining myself as one of the older and more talented dancers.

I don’t remember feeling particularly sad about moving away from Sharon. At the time, all I knew was that I was starting at a school with a tire-swing and my new room
was plastered with dancing cat wallpaper. We moved shortly after my fifth birthday (which took place at a ballet studio, of course), and I remember my parents teaching me our new address and phone number as they filled boxes with clothes and books and lamps.

My passion for dancing slowly faded as I adjusted to life in another Massachusetts town. Here, I found myself presented with other activities, from learning to play the piano to joining a soccer team. Still, whenever I remember Sharon, I think of my worn ballet shoes and a white tutu, twirling around the house with my little sister.
WESTWOOD
66 Skyline Drive
August 1999-
Home for Thanksgiving break, I drive slowly on Pond Street, past Lakeshore Drive, the Lupica’s House and Buckmaster Pond. I am barely moving forward by the time I reach the Sheehan School soccer field. Of course it looks terrible, covered in crunchy brown autumn leaves, the grass long and untamed, the goals barely aligned with the fading white lines. I can practically hear coach’s whistle and feel my legs growing heavy as I complete yet another 400-meter sprint. I see the ball at my feet, the whole field before me, dashing up the sideline and the ball in the back of the net.

I remember that hot August day of sophomore year, that sleepless night as I nervously anticipated the last day of Varsity soccer tryouts. I had spent the summer perfecting my “first touch,” kicking the ball against the garage and attending tournaments in North Carolina and Ottawa and Maine with my club team. And when I wasn’t actually practicing my skills, I was running 800s or 400s at the track with my dad, or pushing myself through another bench-press rep (don’t get too impressed, I could barely lift the bar).

“Stephanie! You’re next,” Caitie said, trotting towards me with a smile. She’d definitely made the team.

I placed my Gatorade bottle in the dewy grass and slowly jogged towards the three coaches seated on the other side of the field, wondering why they had to make this
whole experience feel so dramatic. I stopped and stood before them like a contestant on American Idol, awaiting feedback from the panel of judges.

“You’re going to be on my team,” Coach Chant, the Varsity coach said, his eyes becoming fiery as he told me I was meant to make an impact this season, taking on a leadership role as a sophomore. “But I haven’t figured out exactly what I’m going to do with you,” he continued.

I didn’t care if I played center defense or striker—I was on the team—and that somehow was the only thing that mattered.

After a few weeks of preseason, Coach Chant decided that I would be a right outside midfielder. I remember that first game in Bellingham, 30 minutes on the big yellow school bus, seated next to Emily, who spent most of the ride attempting to craft an elaborate fishtail braid in her thick caramel brown hair. An hour of warm-up drills to pounding music and the announcer’s booming voice shouting my name as a starter, my teammates holding hands in our bright green away jerseys as we listened to the familiar melody of the national anthem.

After ten minutes, we were down 3-0—all the work from preseason, the sore calves and the weird tasting banana protein shakes and the dreaded hill sprints began to feel pointless; we were losing our first game of the season to the worst team in the league.

“Girls!” Mary O’Sullivan, our captain yelled, pulling us into a huddle. “Play to FEET,” she sputtered angrily, alluding to the fact that we weren’t connecting passes, just lofting the ball off the field towards the Bellingham defenders.
Twenty more minutes and we were looking better, firing shots on goal and earning a couple corner kicks. Five minutes before the end of the first half, Mary slipped the ball past the Bellingham center defender as I dashed behind her—suddenly, it was just me and the goalkeeper. It wasn’t one of those “wow, I hope I don’t miss” sort of moments I used to experience in basketball or lacrosse or tennis. Instead, it was simple, a light tap past her and the ball rolled to the back of the net. 3-1 just before the whistle blew for halftime.

As the second half began, the pale blue September sky darkened and bright lights illuminated the field. I had never played a game “under the lights” before, and I felt adrenaline rushing through my tired legs. Coach didn’t like to make substitutions, so most of us were ready to play the entire 80 minutes.

A couple of moments into the half, the speedy Bellingham forward with the blunt bangs darted around our outside defender and lofted the ball into the back right corner of the goal. 4-1. A comeback seemed unlikely, but under the bright lights, I felt determined, continuing to race up and down the right sideline, lofting crosses into the box for Marina or Mary or Alison to tap into the net.

We lost 4-3 but Coach was proud. We had played well. We had come together as a team. We were a family, he said. And he’d see us at 7 a.m. at Flahive Field on Sunday morning for practice. “Westwood on three!” he shouted, and we made our way back to the big yellow school bus, zipping up jackets and pulling off pairs of muddy cleats.
A silent thirty-minute ride down Main Street, my dad waiting for me outside the high school. He sensed my disappointment as I slowly opened the car door, plopping down in the front seat with my gym bag and school backpack.

“That was the best game I’ve seen you play,” he said, and suddenly I was transported back to those Saturday mornings of youth soccer, my dad standing with the other coaches on the sideline, directing us around the tiny 6 v. 6 field. Sometimes we would lose 2-1 or win 6-3, but my dad always gave me honest feedback about my play. I learned that it was possible to lose and play well in the same way it was possible to win and play poorly.

I turn left onto Route 109, making my way through the center of the tiny town of Westwood. I pass the Dunkin Donuts and then the Starbucks, stopping at the traffic light next to the nail salon and Victoria’s, the pizza parlor that seems to change its name every year (it was once Primo’s, then Tuscany’s, then Olivio’s).

I continue on towards Vello’s, the town diner, the smell of pancakes and French fries wafting. Then, I pass the new library, built next to the historic old library. The rest of the sights of Westwood whip past me: Chiara, the Mediterranean bistro that my parents love, KaBloom, the charming flower shop that always seems strangely busy, and the random dentist office between them.

I signal to turn left on Summer Street, the winding road towards home. In October, driving on the street offers a stunning array of reds, yellows and oranges, the leaves swirling in the autumn wind. But by late November, the trees are bare and covered in a layer of frost—winter is coming.
I think of those early winter mornings seated in front of the television, watching a shivering newscaster talk about the impending storm while the names of various Boston elementary schools flashed on the bottom of the screen: “SCHOOL CLOSED” or “THREE HOUR DELAY” or “EARLY DISMISSAL.” Jenn and I still in our snowflake pajamas seated on the floor, giggling as we scooped spoonfuls of Cinnamon Toast Crunch into our mouths, and finally the news: “DEDHAM COUNTRY DAY: SCHOOL CLOSED.”

“SNOW DAY!” Jenn would cry, while my mom turned up the volume to listen to the newscaster predicting 18 to 36 inches of snow. Snow days meant hot chocolate with candy canes, building snow forts in the front yard, baking butter cookies, going sledding, watching too many episodes of Spongebob Squarepants and sitting together in the family room as flakes piled up on the deck outside.

When we reached high school, the “Snow Day” became extra time to complete homework assignments or study for the SATs or work on college essays. Yet, one thing stayed the same: despite the lingering pressure to prepare for a pre-calculus test or write a U.S. History paper, we gathered in the family room after dinner to watch the snowfall, listening to “Let It Snow”
or “Winter Wonderland.” There was something magical about seeing the glistening powder accumulate outside while we remained on the couch under warm blankets. In a few days the roads would be cleared, snow banks lining the narrow streets, and the rush of life would go on, everyone returning to the classroom or the office. But in this moment, we could be still while the blizzard wore on.

- I turn left right onto Skyline and into our driveway, where I find Jenn taking free throws in the fading evening light, Five hundred a day, as her basketball coach has instructed. Together, we wander inside, my last night at home before returning to college. My parents sit in the family room, next to our Christmas tree that we always set up earlier than most families, the twinkling lights illuminating the room, soft music playing in the background. They announce that they are, “watching the sunset,” their favorite activity. Cody, our eight year-old black Labrador retriever, sits curled up at my mom’s feet.

Somehow, my parents never tire of watching the sun sink into the trees, the sky turning a wild blend of pink and purple and orange—an artist’s canvas. Mom has already ordered the pizza from Victoria’s and dad has wrapped up his work for the day.

“This is when the real colors begin,” my dad says while the sun disappears, Jenn growing antsy on the lumpy couch by the tree. She reads a text on her phone and does a few hamstring stretches. I want to check my Instagram, or catch up on psychology readings, or call my boyfriend, but I remain on the couch, fixated on the vivid sky.

I realize that I didn’t watch a single sunset during my first semester in college; instead I studied in the library or watched a movie with my floormates during that magical time of day that my family refers to as “golden hour.” Eventually the pizza will
arrive and the doorbell will ring and Cody will start barking and I will have to set the table. But in this moment, the sunset reminds me to be still, to breathe, and to take in the world before me.
When I remember St. Louis, I think of that freshman fall: trees shaking in the autumn breeze and crunchy leaves piled in Brookings Quad. I think of Kayak’s Coffee: snowboards hung on the wall, rustic wooden tables and chairs positioned around a glowing fireplace. I think of the unbearable heat of move-in day, hanging my photos of my family and high school soccer team above my bed in Dardick 3309.

It was freshman year and most of us were away from home for the first time, moving to a city that some called the Gateway to the West. During that fall, I loved all of it; the 15 minute walk to my morning psychology class, the hushed voices on the first floor of the Olin Library, the feeling of returning to “my floor”—Dardick Three—in the afternoon or evening after a full day of classes.

We called ourselves the Dardick Family. We regularly dined together in Bear’s Den, taking a break from economics problem sets or Spanish grammar exercises to learn about each other: our siblings, our hometowns and our hobbies. On Fridays, we ventured to restaurants in the city for burgers and shakes or pad Thai or deep-dish pizza. We threw parties on our floor or wandered to other dorms or fraternities for weekend festivities. I liked to think that we took care of each other—we ensured that everyone returned to “the floor” on Saturdays after a night out.
We wanted to know our city. We spent hours studying Metro maps and learning which train or bus would bring us to the Galleria or the Arch or Soulard or Cherokee Street. On other days we walked—to see the “Wild Lights” at the St. Louis Zoo or the photography collection at the art museum or simply to have a picnic in the dewy grass of Forest Park.

Although I had found my Dardick family, it was in St. Louis that I learned to be alone. After a morning class, after lunch with Patrick or Kyle or Kim, I would wander down the snow-dusted hill through Brookings Quad to Kayak’s Coffee, my North Face hat pulled over my cold ears. I would sit at the wooden table in the back corner, my psychology textbook open before me, watching a lit professor thumbing through a collection of plays, a three year-old taking big bites of gooey butter cake, a barista crafting the perfect brown sugar latte. Here, I could write my short stories and finish my reading and writing and studying. It was here that I found my own space, a sense of calm away from the buzz of Dardick Three and the bustle of the campus between classes.

In St. Louis, the rules were lifted for the first time—there was no curfew to rush home for, no reason not to go out for ice cream at midnight on a Monday or stay up until
four in the morning listening to my floormate play “Down in the Valley” on his acoustic guitar.

On one Tuesday in late October, I found myself purchasing a $10 ticket for “Head and the Heart,” a popular band among my floormates. I was familiar with some of their music, namely the previously mentioned “Down in the Valley,” and wanted to experience their sound live with my friends. I remember clicking “Buy” on Ticketmaster, trying to ignore the looming psychology exam I had to take and Walden literature paper I needed to write. Somehow, this concert just seemed too important.

The show was at a venue called the Pageant, which was on the Loop, the hipster street of shops and restaurants about a mile and a half from our dorms. The Pageant was known for hosting up-and-coming bands—it’s small size allowed every concertgoer to get close to performers.

“You’ll be home by midnight!” my friend Kim assured me.

We decided to take the bus from campus to the Loop, only to realize it was out of service. I shivered in the October wind; suddenly my decision to leave my jacket behind to avoid the coat check seemed silly.

“I guess we have to walk,” Kyle said, looking like a tourist with his camera dangling around his neck. Rohan nodded in agreement.

We wandered through campus, past the business school’s Simon Hall, through the quad, and towards the lit path to the Loop. The decision to even attend the concert began to seem more and more ridiculous—what if I got sick in the cold before my psychology test? Why was I so committed to hearing a band that I just learned about? I knew my pre-
med roommate, Jen, was probably reading and highlighting and note-taking in the basement of Olin Library, and I began to feel like I should have been doing the same.

Upon entering the Pageant, the Head and the Heart on stage playing their opener, “Cats and Dogs,” my floormates and I rushing through the crowd to find a good spot, I felt relieved—this was exactly where I was supposed to be. I was surrounded by other young people wearing flannels and jeans and worn combat boots, all of us swaying together to the soothing and mellow sound of the Head and the Heart. Suddenly, my floormates and I all had our arms around each other; we sang to the songs we knew and danced to the ones we hadn’t heard. Rohan somehow knew every song, his low voice rising through the rest of the audience.

When the band left the stage, the crowd protested: we hadn’t heard “Down in the Valley,” the Head and the Heart’s most famous track. I hadn’t attended enough concerts yet to know that they would return after letting us yell and clap and cheer for a little while. So when they did take the stage again, I was surprised, thrilled, a little kid on Christmas morning.

“I wish I was a slave to an age old trade…” the lead singer began, and the audience erupted. I knew every word and so did they. We sang together, our arms in the air as our voices blurred together in the darkness.

“California! Oklahoma, and all of the places I ain’t never been to…” we shouted along with the band as they reached the chorus of the song. The music rushed through me—the drums, the guitars, all the voices in the crowd.

I was crushed as the Head and the Heart walked off the stage again, their show was finished, the lights were on, and we were supposed to go home, back to Biology
textbooks and old copies of “The Catcher in the Rye.” My floormates and I loitered at the Pageant; we took photos and bought sweatshirts and souvenirs. As we walked home, I zipped up my new gray sweatshirt and pulled the hood up for warmth as we wandered back along the lit path to the dorms, “Down in the Valley,” echoing in our heads.

After the show, the Head and the Heart became (and remains) my favorite band. It’s true that I love their sound; I love how I can listen to their tracks while I study or walk or drive. Somehow they always soothe me. Although I don’t necessarily associate the band’s sound with St. Louis anymore, every time I hear “Down in the Valley,” I can’t help but think of that night and the cold October air, my friends with our arms around each other, the notes rushing through us.
TOLUCA LAKE
3600 Barham Boulevard
May 2014-August 2014
Palm tree lined streets and winding roads by the sea. The 101 at sunset, the hazy orange sky and the Griffith Observatory’s glimmering golden roof. Surfers bobbing up and down like corks next to the Venice Pier. A new band playing at the Troubadour or the Hollywood Bowl or the Wiltern. Nineteen years old and dropped right in the middle of it all.

My roommate, Devon, was few years older and seemed infinitely more mature. She knew how to make avocado French fries and could easily describe her career goals. And she could merge onto the 405 North without receiving an angry chorus of honks. Meanwhile, I was proud of my ability to prepare a box of mac and cheese.

Our apartment complex, Oakwood, was perfectly positioned between Hollywood and the movie studios, where we worked. Hollywood seeped into our lives. We heard the celebrity gossip, we saw the newest films and we listened to the latest singles. Still, we learned not to identify our employers. We learned not to identify as interns. A simple, “I work in the industry” would almost always suffice.

On weekdays, we turned right on Barham Boulevard towards the studios, traveling deeper into the valley. But on weekends, we almost always went left, towards the lights of Hollywood or the salty air of the beach towns. We wanted to discover all of Los Angeles. Our friends were other outsiders: from Ohio and Kentucky and Virginia, all living our California dream. We knew our time in the city was finite—our lease was two months. We had found a temporary home.
The temporary nature of our home made us wild. We danced as extras in music videos. We leapt off cliffs in Laguna, waiting until the water “looked deep enough” to jump. We stayed out until the bars on Hollywood Boulevard closed. I imagined that nothing in this home could ever feel boring—I dove through the foamy waves of the Pacific, I bumped into actors from my favorite television shows and I regularly drove past the Hollywood Sign.

That summer, I didn’t see the neighborhood of Toluca Lake or my room in the Oakwood Apartments as my home; home was the entire city of Los Angeles: the cool shops on Venice’s Abbot Kinney Boulevard, the trails that ran through Los Feliz’s Griffith Park and the restaurants that lined Santa Monica’s Main Street. I’d stand at the top of the Griffith Observatory at night and look out at the twinkling lights—so many neighborhoods, so many people, so much creativity—and all mine to see and discover.

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Despite the wildness and sense of adventure that defined my life in Los Angeles, it was the moments of routine and places of familiarity that made the city feel like home. The drive through the cliffs to the Malibu beaches on a sunny Saturday. The white chocolate iced coffee from Coffee Bean. The stack of screenplays on my desk at work.
The pasta aisle at the Trader Joe’s on Riverside Drive. The winding path to the top of Runyon Canyon and the soft seats of the AMC movie theater in Burbank.

Friday and Saturday were unpredictable, but Sundays were almost always the same. Wake up to sunlight streaming through the curtains and make French toast with whatever bread we found in the fridge. Clean up last night’s mess and meet up with whoever wanted to join in the parking lot, the heat of the valley rising from the asphalt as we waited under the shade of a leafy palm tree. Get in the car and drive 10 minutes down Cahuenga to Ivar Avenue to find the magic of the Hollywood Farmers’ Market.

I’d grown up with a Farmers’ Market in my tiny New England town, and I’d never been particularly impressed. My mom and I poked around a few times, running into teachers and neighbors inspecting ears of corn or apple pies. The small driveway between the town high school and the middle school was dedicated to five or six vendors, open Tuesday afternoons during the summer.

But the Hollywood Farmers’ Market, like the city of Los Angeles, was sprawling. Entire roads were closed to make room for the 160 farmers and food trucks that descended on Hollywood every Sunday morning, offering homemade vanilla almond granola and fresh pesto and Saturn peaches. Wandering through the market, we were handed samples of homemade bread with olive oil and slices of apricot and pieces of sweet strawberries—but the entire market was the feast for the senses: arrangements of colorful orchids, the smell of freshly made crepes wafting, and the feel of a ripe plum in our palms.

After a few weeks, we brought bags to carry home our boxes of fresh raspberries and bags of sweet potatoes. We had our favorite vendors and we learned the difference
between white and yellow nectarines. We recognized the same woman with the straw basket and floppy hat by the cheese stall and the man with a scruffy beard and flip-flops near the bagel bakery.

Sunday nights were about cooking—incorporating flavors from the farmer’s market into our dinner instead of making a quick stop at In-N-Out. We ate spaghetti with arugula pesto and Parmesan, caprese salad with torn basil and heirloom tomatoes, vanilla ice cream with fresh blackberries or figs. We let Pinterest recipes and the items we picked up from the market guide our meals—we learned what it meant to eat seasonally and locally, at least for one night.

On those Sundays, walking through the Farmers’ Market or eating forkfuls of pesto spaghetti, Los Angeles wasn’t a place to explore and discover. It wasn’t a town of celebrities and beaches and hiking trails and cool bars. Instead, it was the city where I lived—my home—where my day was about the simple act of buying groceries and making dinner with my friends.
“Welcome to CMC!” the signs read, as we pulled up to campus. Arriving at Phillips Hall, my dorm for the semester, I remembered why I’d fallen in love with this place. It was a sort of wonderland for a kid from the East Coast, and for any college student really. A town where the temperature rarely dropped below 70. A campus with views of snow-capped mountains and palm tree-lined walking paths. Teatime every day featuring free rice krispie treats and Peet’s Coffee. It all sounded like a dream.

But it wasn’t home, at least not at first. It wasn’t home when I walked through North Quad for Spanish class or when I swiped into Collins Dining Hall or when I studied at the Motley with new friends. Home remained Los Angeles, the city I’d come to love during the summer in Toluca Lake, and now I found myself 45 minutes away from it, a long drive on the 10 Freeway. I missed lying on Zuma Beach in Malibu. Reading scripts at the office. Hiking to the top of Runyon Canyon. Wandering along the Hollywood Reservoir. Seeing shows at El Rey and meeting friends at the bars on Sunset.

I decided that I needed to know Claremont the way I’d known Los Angeles. I explored the Village, browsing thrift stores and checking out coffee shops. I attended office hours and found my favorite study spots around campus. And I made an appearance at any and every theme party on campus, making use of my “costume bag,” an assortment of thrift store neon leggings, leather jackets and printed t-shirts that I’d bought with my floormates in St. Louis.

Still, it wasn’t until fall break that I came to see Claremont as my home. Nine hours on the 5 Freeway with a group of girls, headed north towards San Francisco with only a vague plan for our four days away from campus.
We left at noon, ambitiously hoping to arrive by dinnertime, stuffing our duffel bags and backpacks into the trunk of Khadija’s minivan. I sat by the window and watched the California farmland rush by. We talked and played cards and made multiple Starbucks stops. As we approached the Bay, the sky darkened and clouds hung over the mountains, the lights of the city glittering in the distance. Some of my fellow passengers—and new friends—dozed off, but I remained awake, never one to sleep in transit.

Traffic derailed our plans so we arrived at Khadija’s older brother’s apartment at 9 p.m. He ordered us cheese pizzas from Domino’s and served us shots of vodka, setting the tone for the next few days: a blur of wild adventures through the city of San Francisco. We took buses and trains to see Downtown and the Marina and the Mission. We wandered in and out of city bars—attempting to share two fake ID’s among the five of us—and hiked up to Golden Gate and lay on the beaches even though it was barely sixty degrees.

Then, on Saturday, we rose early and bought bagels and coffee from the café down the street before taking the BART to Berkeley for the UCLA game. The clouds cleared as we reached the Cal campus, where we visited a slew of crowded fraternity houses, greeting Khadija’s high school friends and sipping cheap beer. It was strange to join in another university’s tradition, and we felt hilariously overdressed in our jeans and boots, all the Cal students wearing cropped t-shirts, dirty sneakers and cut-off shorts.

Still, my favorite part of the trip came at the end. Leaving the sleeping city of San Francisco at five in the morning to take the “scenic route” down Highway 1 through
Monterey and Carmel. The water a pale blue as Lindsey navigated the winding roads through the mountains that led to Big Sur.

We felt prepared because we had rented a tent from the Outdoor Initiative Center and purchased snacks, yet we hadn’t reserved a campsite or a cabin. The first site we visited felt too isolated and woodsy, and no was particularly thrilled to pay $15 each to pitch our tent in a patch of dirt and walk ten minutes to use showers and bathrooms. We settled on a spot a bit further down the road—$5 each and close to beaches and hiking trails.

We quickly realized why our campsite was cheaper than the others—it was pretty much infested with prairie dogs and the parking lot was over a quarter-mile from the campsite. As a former track runner, a quarter-mile hadn’t sounded very intimidating, but it felt incredibly far with my overstuffed duffel and load of grocery bags.

When we finally made it to our campsite, pitching the tent presented its own challenges, with Hannah leading us through each step. Unlike my friends, I’d never been camping as a kid and felt useless attempting to contribute to the process, pounding stakes into the uneven terrain.

“Our home for the night,” I said, as we finally got the tent to stay in place.

By four in the afternoon, we were set up and ready to explore. We stepped through tall trees over a wooden bridge, eventually finding our way to Pfeiffer Beach, a popular spot for surfing. But on the cool and cloudy day, we found the beach empty, covered in rocks and logs. We took it in: so much untouched beauty, the foamy waves gently lapping the pink sand. I thought of the crowded beaches I’d visited near Boston at
the end of that summer, every patch of sand covered in towels and chairs and coolers and plastic buckets; the noise of people chatting and kids screaming and lifeguards whistling. This place felt quieter, simpler—peaceful.

Hannah was anxious to get hiking and we were starting to shiver in our fleeces and sweatshirts, so we stepped onto one of the trails that wound upwards along the sea. We didn’t have a trail map or cell service, so I’m not sure what would’ve happened if we got lost (Spoiler alert: we didn’t).

Training for soccer and track, Lindsey and Hannah took turns sprinting the steeper parts of the trail while Khadija, Sanj and I snapped pictures. We reached what we assumed was “the top” of the trail after an hour or so, huddling together on a log next to some yellow flowers and watching the waves roll in slowly towards the shore, the sky brightening to a golden color.

“It’s so beautiful,” Lindsey said, because that’s all there was to say. The feeling of taking in the mountains and the golden sky and the sparkling Pacific Ocean was overwhelming and humbling. Here, there were no emails to send, no assignments to complete and no parties to attend—it was just us and the magic of Big Sur’s Andrew Molera State Park.

Eventually, someone suggested that it would be a good idea to get back to our
campsite before the sun set, so we made our way back down the trail, stopping by Pfeiffer Beach for one last look at the ocean.

We woke with the sunlight the next morning for five more hours in the car along the winding roads by the sea and eventually through the California farmlands. A stop in Pasadena for dinner, waiting for the L.A. traffic to clear as we sat in a café, attempting to rejoin the rest of the world again. We hadn’t showered in a couple days at this point, so the rest of the world was probably not thrilled to embrace us.

Finally, another hour on the 210 Freeway, pulling into the North Quad Parking Lot, the dorm windows glowing in the darkness as we unloaded our bags. Someone said it was good to be back and I found myself agreeing. To return to campus after a whirlwind of unknown places felt comforting: to experience familiarity after so much newness. It was in this moment that Claremont became home, walking back towards the dorms with my friends who I had come to know so well over the course of four days on the road, already reminiscing about our adventures.
SILVER LAKE
711 North Benton Way
June 2015-July 2015
The Silver Lake summer began in shades of grey: the clouds of “June Gloom” hanging over the reservoir in the cool morning. Every weekday I got in my car and drove through Koreatown and then Hollywood and then West Hollywood and then Beverly Hills and finally Century City, Avenue of the Stars, the land of the talent agencies. This was where you were supposed to go to make it in Hollywood. This was where you competed—to read the most scripts, to talk to the most agents, to earn the most recognition as an intern.

Silver Lake was different, though: Silver Lake slowed me down. I thumbed through paperbacks at Skylight Books. I held my down dog at Urth Yoga. I sipped cappuccinos at Sqirl and I wandered through the Silver Lake Meadow on sunny Saturdays.

I moved into 711 North Benton Way on a Friday, hauling my bulging suitcases up the uneven stairs while Brooke held the pale purple door open for me. I had never lived in a more aesthetically pleasing place: mason jars filled with flowers on the kitchen table, stacks of cookbooks balanced against a shelf, handmade frames with images of Big Sur mountains and San Francisco streets. Brooke turned on a lamp and lit a lavender candle and led me into Amy’s room—my room for the summer.
Amy hadn’t exactly moved out—her closet was still stuffed with sundresses and boots and floppy hats, with a small section cleared out for me, her subletter. Her necklaces hung around a makeup mirror and cards she had received leaned against a neat pile of magazines she had written for. I pulled open the cream silk curtains and looked outside, the lights of Los Angeles glowing.

“You can even see the Hollywood sign on a clear day,” I remembered Amy saying before she left to work in London for the summer.

There’s something strange about living in someone else’s space, among someone else’s things. I would have placed Amy, a former co-worker, somewhere between a friend and an acquaintance, yet her room felt incredibly personal, a celebration of her adventures with her friends and family. Still, I flipped the pages of her calendar. I watered her succulents and made sure they received enough sun. But I left everything in its place—because in the end, 711 North Benton was more her home than mine.

During my eight weeks in Silver Lake, I sometimes felt like an outsider looking in on other people’s lives. When I read in the Silver Lake Meadow, I discovered clusters of
women wearing floppy hats and men with scruffy beards gathered around bottles of wine and crackers on breezy Saturday afternoons, soaking in the Los Angeles summer. Meanwhile, during my morning coffee stops at Intelligentsia or Dinosaur on Sunset Boulevard, I almost always saw groups of freelance screenwriters or graphic designers seated together, hunched over laptops and almond milk cappuccinos.

Most of my Los Angeles friends lived on the West Side, a grueling, traffic-ridden eleven-mile drive down Santa Monica Boulevard. These friends saw Silver Lake as a distant land, and while they occasionally came to “visit,” looking around the “Most Hipster Town in America” like overeager tourists, I found that my social life mostly existed on the West Side. I didn’t truly feel a part of the Silver Lake world until Matt, a friend from work who lived in nearby Koreatown, asked me to try a happy hour spot down the street from 711 North Benton.

Suddenly, I found myself joining the buzzing neighborhood community, seated at a wooden booth enjoying $3 tacos. The quirkiness of Silver Lake came through with our orders, as Matt found his beer topped with a passion fruit cayenne popsicle. We stayed until last call at 11pm and then walked along Sunset, past the always buzzing Silver Lake Ramen and the Thirsty Crow, known for its wide selection of whisky and beer.

Returning to 711 North Benton, I was immediately greeted by Brooke, who ushered me towards her bathroom, grabbing my arm like a younger sister.

“What’s going on!?” I cried. Brooke squealed and pointed to a spider, dwelling on the bathroom’s tile floor.

I looked at her helplessly—killing spiders had always been my dad’s job or Jenn’s job. Apparently it was my responsibility in this new home.
Perhaps the beer and popsicle combination made me bold, but I immediately grabbed a rubber flip flop from my room and squashed the spider while Brooke Snapchatted the whole ordeal, ensuring her followers received live updates regarding our struggle.

It was late so we both retreated to our rooms after battling the spider. Despite the anxious adrenaline still rushing through me—I’m known as the one with the fear of bugs in my family—I felt strangely calm. As I settled under Amy’s purple quilt, I no longer felt like an outsider to my neighborhood and to 711 North Benton. Somehow, the combination of going out, of squashing an unwanted spider, of being needed, had made the space around me feel like my own.

On a hot Tuesday in July during the Silver Lake summer, I found myself driving down Sunset Boulevard towards North Benton, a new hardcover from Skylight Books beside me, my work heels thrown in the backseat. I slowed down as I approached Sunset Junction, the center of Silver Lake, a hub of trendy restaurants and cool coffee shops and stylish bars. But the entire area was dark. No one milled around outside Forage, the popular farm-to-table spot, and even Café Stella—known for its wine and charcuterie—looked quiet. I stopped at the traffic light and wondered if the zombie apocalypse was about to hit my charming neighborhood.

As I continued on Sunset, the street remained shadowy, the storefronts unlit and the traffic lamps blinking a confused yellow. I turned onto Benton Way and parked outside the apartment on the dark street. A candle glowed in our window.
When I turned the lock and entered the living room area, I found Brooke seated beside the lavender candle in an old UNC sweatshirt, her laptop balanced on her knees. She proclaimed the end of the world—a power outage in our half of Silver Lake—announcing that her phone had already died and her laptop was not far behind. She’d probably kill her battery if she worked on the last act of her screenplay as she’d planned. Meanwhile, the power outage had killed my plan to cook spaghetti with cherry tomatoes and resume Season 2 of Friday Night Lights—the two of us were helpless.

I settled onto the couch with a bowl of cereal, unsure how to proceed. My roommate relationship with Brooke was defined by pizza and movie nights, and our conversations didn’t typically go beyond “how was work” and “did you hear it’s supposed to rain today” (an unusual occurrence in the endless summer of Los Angeles).

But in the warm candlelight, everything was different: we talked about ex-boyfriends and humiliating stories and our dreams. We were miles away from the East Coast where we had both grown up—thrown together because we found a fascination with the world of movies and television.

“Some people go home,” Brooke said, placing her laptop beside her.

“Why?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine leaving the creative and dynamic city of Los Angeles.

“They don’t make it,” she said. “They give up.”

While neither of us had exactly “made it”—I was a measly intern and Brooke was still in the editing phase of her screenplay—we were a part of it all. She typed pages of dialogue at Intelligentsia Coffee while I wrote script coverage at my desk. Somehow, we
had found our place in Los Angeles, away from the distant towns where we were from, making Silver Lake our home—at least for a moment.
SANTA MONICA
1915 Ocean Way
July 2015-August 2015
I grew up with salty hair and sandy feet, a boogie board tucked under my arm. I built sandcastles and searched for seaglass and splashed in the foamy waves. I fell in love with the ocean, the beach, the winding trail through the dunes.

In New England, “going to the beach” was a special occasion; it was an outing, a trip. I grew accustomed to long car rides for a day by the water or three hour flights in the winter for a week by the sea. I relished those moments in the sun and dreaded leaving, back to the car or the airport for a long trip home.

After two months in Silver Lake, Amy and Brooke’s lease ended and I moved to a one-month sublet near Santa Monica for the rest of my talent agency internship. Here, the beach became my life—everything smelled like the sea. I often fell asleep with flecks of sand on my feet, my windows open so I could hear the distant waves of the Pacific. I became accustomed to the sight of surfers waxing their boards in the parking lot or wandering barefoot past the shops and restaurants on Main Street, their wetsuits draped around their waists.

I had never been a “morning person” but my alarm sounded at 7 a.m. so I could walk barefoot along the shore before I drove to the office, a sort of meditation I referred to as “my workout.” I began to recognize my fellow walkers, neighbors: the two ladies wearing straw hats and bathing suits the color of the sun, the jogger with dark sunglasses and a visor and the twenty-something with his wagging golden retriever.

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My favorite morning in Santa Monica: a cool Sunday at the end of July, my mom in town for the weekend, my second day in this new home.
“You have to go to Gjusta,” Brooke had said, as I lugged my suitcases down the 
stairs of 711 North Benton, preparing for my move. “You’ll love it.”

And so when we woke up the next morning, my mom and I decided to try the cool 
new bakery warehouse-style space for breakfast.

“No one walks in L.A,” I’ve been told. And it’s true. Somehow driving or calling 
an Uber or asking a friend for a ride always seems more convenient when navigating the 
busy streets of West Hollywood or the Valley or the East Side. But by the beach, walking 
two miles to breakfast with a view of the ocean sounded doable, even pleasant.

We walked along Ocean Way, by the outdoor roller hockey rink and morning 
yoga group at Lifeguard Hut 29. Then, we cut up to Main Street, wandering past packed 
coffee shops and small art galleries. After another mile, we walked by the popular Rose 
Ave and turned on Sunset Ave, not to be confused with the Sunset Blvd that runs from 
Echo Park to the Pacific Palisades.

Off the short street we came to a busy parking lot and discovered a hectic 
restaurant with no signage: Gjusta. My mom and I wandered through the swinging doors 
and found a crowd of people in front of an enormous display case, holding menus and 
pointing at loaves of banana bread and earl grey scones. Other customers lingered at a 
bar, sipping macchiotos, flipping through newspapers and chatting. Plates of buckwheat 
waffles and pastrami sandwiches whipped past us. We were only a half-mile from the 
Venice Beach Boardwalk but I felt like I had been transported to a café in a bustling 
European city. We were overwhelmed.

After inspecting a menu, my mom and I settled on several items to try: two 
cappuccinos, a frittata with a side salad, multigrain porridge with nut milk, a bowl of
fresh berries, and fruit and nut bread with butter. Then, we ventured outside to find a small courtyard decorated with twinkling lights and a hodgepodge of seating. We settled on a low wooden table positioned against a brick wall, one of the few spots available.

My mom was amused by the scene around us, young people in floppy hats and fedoras eating egg sandwiches and bowls of granola. Some dined alone, thumbing through paperbacks or scrolling through their Instagram feeds, while others sat in groups at long rustic picnic tables. Servers hurried around us calling out names, carrying an assortment of pastries and sandwiches. Our food took longer than expected, so we were presented with a comically large baklava croissant before the rest of our order arrived. Of course it was all delicious.

We walked back along the beach, the bustling chatter of Gjusta fading as we took in the peaceful sound of rolling waves. I would gain this feeling of peace again and again in Santa Monica, leaving the behind ringing phones and intense meetings that defined my internship and returning to the calm of the ocean. While the apartment where I lived was tiny, dark and uncomfortably warm with no air-conditioning, the beach somehow brought me the same comforts of a home, providing me with a space where I felt truly free. It was
here that I could reflect on the day, perched in the pale blue Lifeguard Hut 17 as I watched the sun drain into the Pacific, the sky a hazy blend of oranges, pinks and purples.

After a month by the ocean, my internship ended and I traveled home to Boston and then Claremont for junior year. I would return to Santa Monica countless times—as a beachgoer or a hiker from Claremont—but the neighborhood would never truly be mine in the same way.

Each time I return Santa Monica, I experience the odd feeling of an outsider looking in, a visitor in my own former home. I wander along Main Street, past my building and towards the water and Lifeguard Hut #17, but I don’t see the jogger with dark sunglasses or the twenty-something with his golden retriever. I realize I’ve moved on and perhaps they have too.

And yet this place—the foamy waves and footprints in the sand—still allows me to find comfort, a sense of calm away from seminar discussions and dorm gatherings and newspaper meetings. Perhaps in this way the beach will always offer a second home, a feeling of quiet, a space to reflect.
LONDON
Langton Close, Wren Street
January 2016-May 2016
Exmouth Market at night, strands of lights dangling in the winter air, the pubs packed with young people chatting about last night’s football game. The smell of warm bread wafting from Gail’s and a small crowd forming outside Café Kick. Fingers tucked into an old pair of soft gloves. London on a Friday night, after the workday, the surge of energy of the city’s inhabitants.

Stepping off the tube at the Oxford Circus stop, “mind the gap,” and standing on the escalator while commuters rush past. Wandering out of the station, deciding which exit to choose, the crowded streets and the shop store windows offering leather purses and knee-length peacoats and decadent yarn hats. A turn onto Berners Street and into the Italian restaurant hidden away behind the tiny Sainsbury’s grocery store.

Covent Garden in the morning, the magic of Neal’s Yard, windowpanes the color of the sea, ivy growing up the worn brick walls. Perching on a creamy white picnic table while a line forms outside the storefront that serves the best breakfast in London. Tourists in Nike sneakers, holding collections of postcards, cameras hanging around their necks. The hazelnut and butter porridge bowl with banana slices and a frothy cappuccino, the feeling of warmth on a gray and cloudy London day.

Class at the Tate Modern on the other side of the river, a small group of us gathered in rain jackets, cloth backpacks draped over our shoulders. “The room will feel
like a church.” Entering that space—the Rothko room—the silence as we step back, humbled, taking in the blocks of color that somehow create a mood, a feeling that we struggle to articulate.

Climbing those four flights of stairs to the tiny room in UCL’s Frances Gardner House that became “home”: returning from class or the pub or one of the many art museums. The quiet of that space, an escape from the rest of the city, away from the bus stop on Rosebery Ave and the hectic markets on Leather Lane and the crowds on Theobald’s Road.

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An April morning, the gift of a sunny day in London. Purple tulips blossoming in the grass, Soho Square packed with university students and office workers eating sandwiches and sushi rolls.

UCL was on a break from classes—giving students time to return home, to catch up on reading, and to prepare for the upcoming series of May exams. I packed my art history readings and futurism paperback in my polka dot backpack and walked to the Chancery Lane tube station off of Grey’s Inn Road. Citymapper told me I could take the Central Line westbound and change at Notting Hill to arrive in Wimbledon for a visit with old family friends.
I had taken the tube countless times, but usually only for a few stops. Still, I was aware of “tube etiquette,” as Jack, my British flatmate, had walked me through the most important points. Don’t talk loudly. Don’t make eye contact with any of your fellow travellers. Don’t block the exits.

I quickly found an empty seat and tucked my phone in my jeans pocket; unlike the trains in Boston, there was no cell service on the London underground. I read through the film chapter in my futurism book for a few minutes before I became completely paranoid about missing my stop, my eyes darting back and forth between the tube map and the words on the page before me. Finally, I heard the phrase I was waiting for—Notting Hill Gate.

I stepped off the train, swinging my backpack over my shoulder, much to the displeasure of the man sitting beside me. A new puzzle awaited me at Notting Hill Gate: why were there two entrances to the District Line? Did they both lead to the same place? How would I know if the train would stop at my destination?

I’d never been one to ask for directions (that was always my mom’s thing), but I found myself asking a staff member for help. Twenty minutes later and I was stepping off the train in Wimbledon Village, where I saw Liz Spellman and her five year-old twins, Stella and Ashton, waiting outside the station.

My mind flashed to Westwood, to preparing Annie’s mac n’ cheese for the twins while they danced around the living room or drew pictures of poodles and frogs at the wooden kitchen table. I thought of Liz and Dave returning home from their date, talking in hushed voices as they left their shoes by the door.
“They were great!” I would always say, even when Ashton needed serious convincing to brush his teeth and Stella threw a small tantrum before going to bed, her pale blue eyes flashing with anger.

But I wasn’t in Wimbledon to babysit—I was here for an early dinner at a local pub, to experience a little piece of home and family after five months of living on my own in a bustling foreign city.

Stella quickly grabbed my hand, adjusting her long sequin-covered dress and we all began to walk up the giant hill leading to the village, Ashton riding on a tiny scooter behind us.

“How has it been!?” I asked Liz, glancing over my shoulder at Ashton on his scooter. The Spellmans had been living in London for a year already, and planned to stay two more for Dave’s job. I sensed their comfort in the city that still felt so new to me as we arrived at the pub.

“They’ve already picked up some of the slang,” Liz told me. “They ask to go to the loo and to get takeaway.”

They all ordered chicken Caesar salads and somehow Liz and I wound up splitting a carafe of rosé.

“If you’re going to have rosé, the best ones are from France,” she told me, as we navigated the drinks menu. I didn’t know enough about wine to have an opinion on the matter. Although I hadn’t seen the Spellmans since I’d turned twenty-one, having a drink with Liz felt oddly normal. I asked the twins about school and their trip to Rome and their countless activities.
After dinner, we walked further up the hill and purchased popsicles from a convenience store to have in the Southside of Wimbledon Common. It was my favorite time of day—“golden hour”—the light reflecting off the lake and people lying on blankets with picnic baskets before them. I felt the sun sinking into my skin, an incredible sensation after months of puddles and umbrellas.

“Westwood needs a place like this. We need more small town charm,” Liz said, and I agreed.

“So what is going out like over there in London? Do you go to a lot of bars?” she asked, gesturing towards the tube station, as if the suburb of Wimbledon was a far away place from the city of London.

I laughed—even as a young mom Liz remained a college student at heart.

“Well O’Neill’s is fun,” I said, referencing the Irish pub with three levels and countless beers on tap. “And then there’s Mahiki, but its kind of fancy. You have to wear heels.”

“I always wear heels,” Liz said, looking up at me to convey the dramatic height difference. “Some other expat moms want to plan a night out in the city,” she continued.

I had never thought of Liz—or any of my fellow study abroad peers as expats—yet Liz was right. We weren’t British citizens and the U.K. was not our home: we were simply visitors from another place, exploring a land that did not belong to us. Here, we experienced the joy of new adventure along with the occasional craving for the comforts of our own country. (Sometimes, drinking a Dunkin’ Donuts iced coffee or talking about the baseball game or watching an old episode of “Friends” just sounds too appealing).
As Ashton and Stella finished their popsicles, Liz mentioned “bedtime” and received protests.

“It’s still light out!” Ashton cried.

We walked back down the hill and Liz and the twins turned right towards their home while I continued towards the station. I began to feel the effects of the rosé as I walked by crowded pubs and the sky turned a bubblegum pink. Somehow, I found my way back to Frances Gardner House, taking the District Line eastbound and changing at Notting Hill Gate to arrive at Chancery Lane. The bright sky had faded to an inky darkness as I walked up Grey’s Inn Road and entered my room.

It was strange to return to my flat instead of to my house in Westwood after spending time with the Spellmans. I felt a sense of yearning for my own family so many miles away. It was late but with the time change it was the early afternoon in Westwood. I called my mom and dad, told them about my dinner, my tube-navigating skills and the joy of sunshine in London.

Tomorrow I might visit Exmouth Market or Oxford Circus or Neal’s Yard but in that moment I was a child again in my childhood home, letting my parents’ voices lull me to sleep.
Reading List

This is a list of sources that informed or inspired my thesis. It includes scholarly articles, books and memoirs.


In this creative memoir, actress and producer Drew Barrymore reflects on her life with through a series of short stories and vignettes. With these stories, Barrymore recounts her childhood and transition to adulthood.


In this short book, Barbara Cassin, a French philosopher, considers the role of home in the formation of the self and the community. She specifically focuses on feelings of nostalgia, the longing for a former home.


This book of articles examines the relationship between the home and the self, as well as the relationship between the home and society. Edited by Irene Cieraad, a cultural anthropologist at TU Delft, the book considers the structure of the home as well as issues of privacy.


Mary Douglas considers the changing nature of home through this journal article. She also relates how a home can provide unwanted structure for young children and teenagers.


In this memoir, Mary Karr captures her struggle with alcoholism and recounts how this struggle affected and dominated her experiences. Karr’s third memoir, *Lit* is told in a story of short stories, organized into four parts, that relate various pieces of Karr’s life.

This book reveals Mary Karr’s process for writing a memoir. Karr also reflects on what defines a great memoir and shares her own stories.


Written by George Saunders, a short story and essay writer, this New Yorker piece tells the story of a man’s return home from fighting in the war. It considers the strange nature of returning to a former home to discover that people and places have changed.


This memoir recounts Patti Smith’s experience pursuing art and music in New York City. Throughout the memoir, Smith, a singer-songwriter and poet, is forced to live in various areas of the city as she faces financial difficulties. However, New York City remains her home throughout the book.


A memoir by Cheryl Strayed, Wild combines stories of Strayed’s journey along the Pacific Crest Trail with her own memories of her past. Through hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, Strayed attempts to come to terms with her mother’s death and her struggles with drugs. She hikes through California, Oregon and Washington State.


Smith’s M Train meditates on the plight of the writer, combining reflections with vignettes from the past. The stories take place in both the past and present and recount Smith’s travels around the world.


This journal article, published by Aviezer Tucker, a philosopher and social scientist, considers the complex nature of home. Tucker associates home with truth and suggests that a home must prove unique. He also considers moving away from home and the state of homelessness.