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Home

Definition of Home (according to Dictionary.com) :

-noun

1. A house, apartment, or other shelter that is the usual residence of a person, family, or household.
2. The place in which one's domestic affections are centered.
3. An institution for the homeless, sick, etc.
4. The dwelling place or retreat of an animal
5. The place or region where something is native or most common.
6. Any place of residence or refuge.
7. A person's native place or own country
8. A destination.

I love school holidays. I go out every night at ten o'clock with the same group of fifteen friends from my high school days. We gather around a glossy kitchen table, with a bobbling rooster centerpiece from Italy, as the parents sleep upstairs. A couple of twenty-one year olds buy some wine or cases of beer for the night and we start playing Euchre. The cards are worn— bent and broken— because they're saturated with stale alcohol, spilled from our previous parties.

Sometimes, this routine becomes monotonous. We get adventurous and decide to switch things up. Usually, this consists of switching to poker or taking our kitchen-party outside. Sometimes, we'll go grab food at the local 24-hour diner owned by the Greek mafia (at least that's what we think). Even once, we drove out to Buffalo for a good time at a Dave Matthews concert. We enjoy repetition. We enjoy familiarity. We enjoy simplicity. We make what we can out of life and out of Rochester, which isn't much, but isn't little either. Our town hovers in a limbo state between exciting and boring, between alive and dead, which gives us the best of both worlds to an extent.

But occasionally, looking around the table while playing Euchre for the fifteenth night in a row, I can tell we're all waiting for something to happen.

Syracuse University. Fall semester, November 10th, 2009. I held my breath as I picked up my Verizon Envoy 2 cell phone. I dialed my father's number by heart— it's been the same one for years. I wait for him to pick up. As the phone beckons the other line, I look out the window.

It's a bright, warm day in Syracuse towards the beginning of November. Odd weather for this place. The sun heats up my room, but I have the window open for a breeze. I take a deep breath. The phone clicks.

"Hello?"

"Hey Dad," I reply, "I need to talk to you about something really important to me." My face is hot; my hands are shaking. I'm sitting on my bed in fear I might faint from confrontation. I go on for another thirty seconds.

After thirty-one seconds, he hangs up: his reaction to hearing I want to go abroad. The last sentence he screamed at me through the phone rings through my ears: "I want nothing to do with this."

I close my phone.

I'm poor, although I started working when I was fifteen at our local supermarket, Herrema's. Every time I left that store, I was saturated with the smell of deli meats and day-old bread. After that torment, I pulled other local jobs. But no matter how hard I worked, my bank account was always low. Thankfully, the scholarships and federal aid I got for school was a substantial amount— I only had to find two thousand dollars elsewhere. My father refused to co-sign the two thousand dollar loan I needed for school. My mother would have signed in a heartbeat, but she declared bankruptcy three years ago from a business gone sour, so she was denied. She currently has \$300 in the bank to her name and is behind on the bills.

As I walked out of my bedroom, I caught my reflection in the mirror. I stared. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I didn't understand why I felt so compelled to get away. All I knew was that I felt empty and whatever was going to fill that void wasn't in Upstate New York. The reasons for escaping could have been the crazy roommate that threatened to sue me over a shower curtain, the tedious days wasting away with lectures I could have slept through, or the fact that I'm twenty and still haven't had a boyfriend. It could have been all those reasons. But I've dealt with worse. I was looking for an explanation that I didn't have. I'd like to think it was simply because the stars were aligned. A week later, I booked my flight.

I checked my phone: 3:32. Great.

I have another three hours to wait until my group flight leaves to London. Looking around, I attempted to find something that would capture my attention for that long. The television was on the other side of the terminal. I shrugged. Television seemed so inappropriate before I embarked on a five-month journey to another country,

beginning a new chapter in my life. I had to do something more sophisticated—more epic. I cracked open my fresh “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea” Barnes & Nobles edition book and started reading. As I began to dive into the underwater abyss— exploring Atlantis and examining the coral reefs with Captain Nemo and his comrades— I suddenly stopped around page fifty. Is this book raising my expectations for my experience while going abroad, filling me with false hope? Of course, though the chances of being recruited as a crewmember in a submarine from the late 1800’s was slim, I still felt this adventure was too grand compared to the three hours of sitting a terminal I had to do.

Time to create my own adventures and stop living vicariously through fictional characters.

Row 32, Seat A. Row 32, Seat A. Finally, I spotted my seat on the plane. I stopped, looked up, and tried to find some space for my carry-on bags. “Sorry!” I replied, as I bumped my whole body into a man trying to cross behind me. He grunted and moved along. After I successfully got my bag in the overhead compartment, I looked down.

Row 32, Seat A. Yes, that’s what my ticket says. Then why is this random girl sitting in it?

“Excuse me, I believe you’re in my seat.” Her faced crunched in dismay at my remark. This is when I noticed the signs. She was tan, with straight brown hair, Uggs, leggings, and a Northface. No. Not one of THEM. I thought they wouldn’t exist once I crossed borders.

“Uhm, yeah. I’m in this seat. You can sit in the one in front of me.” Thinking that I could get in trouble for sitting in a seat that was clearly not mine, I showed her my ticket and reiterated that, in fact, she was in my seat. Still didn’t get the message.

“So, uh. Like yeah, these are all my friends and you can just sit in the one in front of me or whatever cause we all switched around, okay?” Rolling my eyes and moving to the seat in front of her, I sat down in Row 31, Seat A. Welcome to the beginning of spring semester. Damn you, Jules Verne.

The bus stopped in front of big letters that looked like they were from the sixties: ROYAL NATIONAL HOTEL. At this abode I would spend my first week in London and have less than seven days to find a flat, roommates, and sign the lease. Most of the kids already arranged housing with a landlord prior to coming— I was nervous. We swarmed the foyer. Everywhere, young men in bright orange shirts were shouting advice and directions to accommodate us to our new home

for the next five months. Some of them had British accents, which made me happy. I stored one of my bags away and hauled the other up to my hotel room. It was small— smaller than my double dorm room freshman year of college. The beds were crammed into the corners and our television made a screeching, high-pitched noise whenever it was turned on. The yellowing walls and stained covers made me feel sick whenever I stepped into the room. Luxury was not going to be in my vocabulary while I was here, that I knew.

We were beckoned by the school to meet in the “theater” (or more like, a room full of chairs and a projector) for an information session on the “do’s and don’ts” of London life. They started listing off my necessities. “You’ll need to find a flat, you need to get your Syracuse picture ID taken, make sure you have your Oyster card for travelling, the phone plan is simple...” It felt like everything was swarming in ten different directions. My heart was racing, my hands were sweaty, my body was in flight-mode. I was anxious to get settled. I was anxious to get started.

After carrying 80 pounds of luggage around Central London for thirty-five minutes, I finally relaxed. The porter buzzed us in, causing my muscles to tense up as I grabbed my bags once again. I began trekking down the red velvet corridor towards the elevator.

Even if I only live on the second floor, no way in heck am I attempting to bring these up a few flights of stairs. Is that non-British? Don’t British people walk everywhere? They’d think I was such a lazy American for taking the elevator right now. Oh well, it’s best to ensure that I don’t pull my arms out of my sockets.

As I entered the elevator, a strong scent of Indian curry filled the compact space. The sticky, sweet smell with a hint of bitter herbs crunched in my nose. I couldn’t figure out if I liked it or hated it. I pressed the “2” button and the cramped elevator slowly made its way up.

“Let’s get outta this place!” I echoed through our apartment to my seven other roommates. All the girls I live with study Industrial Design— I’m the odd one out, and also, the one none of them know. They’re all seniors, going into their fifth year of study. I’m a sophomore. But they don’t know that just yet.

I checked the time “22:45.” What the heck does that mean? I calculated it quickly to realize that we had exactly two hours before the club in Soho Square would shut down. Since we didn’t have the internet or purchase the newest edition of “Time Out” magazine, this was our only chance to go out and dance together.

Everyone steadily made their way into our foyer. For some odd reason, we all decided to wear black dresses too. Laughing at the

irony, we all snapped a few photos while a couple of girls finished touching up their make-up or spraying perfume. "Kelly, we're all trusting that you know how to get back here on the bus. Do you?"

"Of course I do!" I had no idea.

But sometimes, I get so excited to explore and discover that I don't care if I know how to get home. All that matters is I get out. Opportunity outweighs rationality. "I'll figure out how to get home later," I thought, as I exited the door and locked it behind me.

After a day of running around the city grabbing necessities— a blue towel from John Lewis, some cheap flats from Primark, and a mattress cover for my previously bed-bug ridden room— I was ready to stop. I walked up the familiar corridor and made my way to our door: 23. I fumbled around in my black purse, which is hanging together with a few safety pins, and finally found the silver key I was looking for. I walk in.

"Okay, okay. Two's and one's is a good game; it's a fast game. Starting to my right: one, two." I look left.

There, sprawled across every couch and every space on the floor, were my roommates with two, unknown specimen. One was blonde, skinny, pale. His sharp jaw matched perfectly with his high cheekbones. He reminded me of a deer in headlights. The other had dark brown hair, disheveled as if he was attempting to get the Robert Patterson look but failed. His eyes, face, and nose were rounder than the Blonde's. They both had British accents.

That's when I remembered: earlier that day, a couple of my roommates mentioned they met some British boys from Ruislip last week at a bar and invited them over to stay at our place for a weekend. With this memory rejuvenated, I attempted to wipe off the confusion on my face and walked over to sit in a small patch of ground still available. "Kelly, hey. This is Alistair and Andrew." What British names.

"Hi, nice to meet you guys. What are you playing, exactly?"

"Two's and One's! It's a British drinking game." Andrew replied.

My curiosity perked. I observed, memorized the rules, and jumped into the scene. That's when my night began. The game started getting more ridiculous as more alcohol was consumed. We started getting more ridiculous as more alcohol was consumed. There wasn't a moment that weekend without laughter. Once it was over, the experience together solidified us. We were almost like family.

It was supposed to rain all afternoon. "Downpour" it said online. But the risk was worth it. I hopped on the Central Line and then transferred to the Northern. Walking out into Leicester Square, I held my breath. What should I expect? Thousands of lights flashing about in a multi-color whirlwind? An elaborate tea party, filled with sweet cakes covered in glitter and cookies decorated with icing? People dancing about on stilts and covered with makeup? Then I turned the corner.

Instead, I saw thousands of people standing in blocked-off lines. Not what I expected. They started to bring in some interesting décor, with plastic blow-up bushes shaped like giraffes and hearts— at least that's something, I thought. A security guard gave me the special treatment for no apparent reason and let me sneak in the front of the Red Carpet. (Which was actually green for this particular event.) I've never been to a premiere before: this would be my first. I would be concentrated in the middle of a swarm of celebrities in the hot Mecca we call Hollywood.

The Odeon Theater looked rather bland amid the scene. It was blocky, with sharp blue rectangles that formed some attempt to create a progressive building. The exterior looked uncomfortable and standard— not what I predicted the theater to look like during the premiere of Tim Burton's version of *Alice in Wonderland*. The cameramen and television hosts started lining up on the other side of the road. Then, the rain started— and it never stopped. It poured. My meager red umbrella attempted to halt the percentage of water my clothes were bound to become, but it unfortunately failed. I felt like a living sponge.

6:30. The shiny black cars came. The next thing I know, cameras were flashing left to right, fans were screaming, and the Red (Green) Carpet was flocked with celebrities. The stars—Johnny Depp, Tim Burton, Anne Hathaway— were dressed in elaborate gowns and tuxedos, escorted by umbrella carriers, huge bodyguards, and their dates. It was a battle to the death for a minute of their attention. They smiled for the cameras, signed the fans posters, and made their way inside the Odeon. That's when I realized: this was all an act. I doubt those celebrities wanted to walk around in the cold rain for an hour. But they had no say: this was their job. Some part of me was hoping this would be an out-of-body experience. I wanted to see magic. It struck me— the Odeon was, in fact, a perfect choice. They dressed it up, filled it with spectacle, showcased the movie stars— but underneath, it's merely your ordinary, industrial theater. There was no magic. Just a lot of crappy embellishments.

By the time the event was over, I was drenched. The Red (Green) carpet was drenched. The movie stars were drenched. It was great.

I walked down the old familiar log steps into the basement. It was a Wednesday night and I had no class the next morning. The sound of an electric organ and clarinet filled my ears. A waiter dressed in a Lederhosen smiled at me as I passed him. He remembered me. I was by myself as I took a seat down at the bar and ordered my regular pint. Looking around, I figured I was the youngest person there. I nodded in the direction of the owner when he saw me. He made his way over and introduced me to a bunch of his friends, all over fifty years old. One of them, a well-dressed Scottish grandpa, started talking to me about his life. He currently lives in Tripoli and works as a mercenary. I didn't know what a mercenary was, but it sounded like something involving guns and killing people. That didn't stop me from doing the Rumba with him, though. And thanks to my swaying hips, he bought me a drink after to cool off.

I started to get inspired: I was by myself, exploring the unknown abyss of the night. I jumped up to the electric organ and told the man to start "I Will Survive." The next thing I know, the whole Austrian pub is full of couples dancing to my diva-licious voice. After my singing session, I was exhausted. I bid Scottish grandpa adieu, and as I was walking out, everyone shook my hand and said I was fantastic. How I love my local pub.

Midterms are looming around the corner. I have two days until my Spring Break starts in Germany. I haven't packed. My phone needs credit on it. I should probably wash my clothes and eat the fresh food in the fridge before it goes bad. Also, the dishes need to be washed again. I did them twice yesterday, so I'm going to leave that present for someone else tonight.

It's Monday— the Oscars were on yesterday and I didn't go to sleep until four in the morning. I woke up at eight. Christoph Waltz won an Academy Award for best Supporting Actor, at least. It was worth staying up for. Alistair and Andrew came over during the weekend, too. We just stored the mattress behind our leather couch until someone else comes along.

I'm staring at two blank essays due tomorrow and I can't focus. I try to type on the computer but all I see is a dizzying screen— I can feel my eyes tighten, beckoning me to sleep. Three of my roommates are sitting in the living room with their Macbooks open typing away at papers and projects. It's silent, except for the movement of cars passing by on Bayswater Road and the couples chattering on the sidewalk beneath us.

It's calm. It's routine. I'm okay.
Actually, I'm better than okay. I'm great.