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Navigating My Life: Memoirs of a College Student

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NAVIGATING MY LIFE: MEMOIRS OF A COLLEGE STUDENT

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English**

In the College of Arts and Sciences
at Salem State University

By

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ABSTRACT

For many students, college is one of the most defining times in a person's life. With the overarching theme of coming-of-age, this collection of creative nonfiction essays details the author's personal development during her college years. The pieces are centered on experiences, including her time spent as an orientation leader, her travels to Europe and the Northeastern United States, and her coverage of a political rally.

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Time of My Life

They say “time is the best medicine,” and while I find that sentiment to be true, I have also found uprooting myself to another place has been an essential step to my growth.

During the fall semester of 2014, I found my life uninspiring and mundane. I was a junior, and everything about college resembled an outdated toy that was once all the hype on TV commercials, but was now condemned to live on the discounted shelf. Every day was so predictable I thought I was living in the movie *50 First Dates* or *Groundhog Day*. Wake up at six thirty, grab something to eat on the rush to catch the shuttle, attend classes, go to work, eat dinner, shower, do homework, bed. It was an endless cycle of lather, rinse, repeat. The only thing that got me through that period of checking my phone’s countdown app each night before falling asleep was the thought of studying abroad that upcoming summer in Liverpool, England.

Ever since I was nine years old, I had dreamed of studying abroad, which was when my older cousin, Stephanie, decided to spend a semester in Australia. I had never heard of study abroad prior to her departure, and I thought it was the coolest thing in the world. I can still vividly remember gathering around my family’s tower computer to read her e-mails. One photo that stood out was one of her feet just before she jumped out of a plane to skydive. I wanted nothing more than at that moment to reach through the screen and take the plunge into the unknown.

During the beginning of the summer before my junior year, I had lost all hope of studying abroad. After some discouraging visits to the Center for International Education, it seemed as though studying abroad would cost me a kidney...that is, until I was helping my childhood best

friend, Angela, prepare for her three week trip that July to Siena, Italy. As we talked, she suggested to me that the summer was the best and most affordable time to study abroad. The remainder of that summer, I spent most of my time exploring programs online and re-visiting the Center until I found some I liked in Liverpool. Liverpool had always been one of my top travel destinations because that's where my two favorite bands, the Beatles and the Wombats, hail from. After seeing that there were programs in this location, what motivated me that summer as I swept sticky candy off the floor while working as an usher was knowing that I was going to be living a movie in a year's time.

At the end of October, my parents told me that we didn't have the finances for me to go to Liverpool. That semester I had tried my best to lower the cost by meeting with the Center a couple more times and sending out as many e-mails as my fingers could type to seek out scholarships, but there was no way I was going to make my dream a reality. It would cost \$10,000 to go abroad for three weeks! That is the same price it costs a student at my university to live on campus and have a meal plan for a semester. The rejection stung as I had started looking at programs since the beginning of my college career. I gave up at the end of the first semester of my sophomore year, and having Angela build me back up, only to have it taken away from me like a rug being pulled out from under my feet, hurt. I was wallowing until Halloween, when a group of friends, including Angela and I, were inside the Jerry Remy's Sports Bar & Grille in Boston for her twenty-first birthday and a guy wearing a maroon t-shirt, jeans, and a beanie approached me.

Salar was the type of guy you'd hope to find on Match.com- well travelled, Irish, passionate about art, and with a business degree from a college ranked in the top 1% of

universities in the world: the University of Liverpool. If I ever doubted fate before, I didn't then. He had intense eyes that when he looked at you it made you feel noticed, which was something considering the bar had such flashy TV screens they could have caused seizures. The screens bathed his face in light. Upon meeting him, he told me his name was salad minus the 'd' (my friends still only refer to him as 'Salad') and we talked for some time. He was an expat working as an analyst for a company that develops healthcare tools; I brought up my major; and we laughed at the cast of characters in the bar which included a goofy man dressed as Ronald McDonald, neither of us wore a costume.

Before he and his friend Ze left, he handed me his phone so he could take my number. Later that night when my group of friends and I were at another bar across the city, I received a text asking me to join him at a party in Somerville. I didn't end up going because we weren't nearby and it was Angela's birthday. I thought I'd never hear from him again. That he would always remain a sweet memory from a night out in the big city, but two days later while I was lying in bed doing homework I received a text from him asking me out.

Salar and I never hung out. We tried, or rather I tried to see him, but we always had conflicting schedules. On the one hand, I was at least transparent with him when the days he'd suggest wouldn't work- I promised my friends a girls' night, I had to study for a test, etc.- but when I would pick a time he would tell me he was free and then stand me up. It was humiliating to hear my friends later tell me they-told-me-so. When I texted Salar, I felt like a teenager again. Never one to go boy crazy, Salar had me smiling ear to ear all day long. To paraphrase the song 'This Is Not A Party' by the Wombats, I was dreaming in Technicolor, but living in black and white. Basically, I never actually liked Salar, but rather the idea of him. Salar was an exotic

creature inside that very American bar with his delicious accent and European suave. I had never ventured outside of the East Coast upon meeting him. The only place I had ever visited that had a culture different than that of Massachusetts' was Quebec City, Canada, which I traveled to in the eighth grade on a chaperoned school trip.

I told Salar to get lost upon coming to the realization that everything I liked about him did not make him a person of character. Without a plan to see the world and a love interest, I found myself more depressed than when I discovered I couldn't go abroad. My life resembled England's famous overcast weather. Time started stressing me out. I was three semesters away from graduating and I became anxious I was running out of time for an adventure before I had to settle down for a 9 to 5 job. At night, I started hearing the Salem State alarm clock I received that October for the scholarships I won. *Tick, tick, tick*. I couldn't sleep as the noise sounded so similar to a bomb about to go off. The insistent ticking got so bad I had to put the alarm clock in an old purse and stick it in the farthest corner of my closet.

Salar was more than just the first guy to flirt with me at a bar, which also happened to be the first bar I'd ever been in where I could legally drink. What was painful about things not working out with him was that I thought dating him would be the equivalent to getting involved with one of my rock idols and that he would also be my substitute for not studying abroad. I assumed he would provide the same feeling my favorite music gave me, escapism. While Salar could introduce me to Liverpool, I figured I could show him more of New England as he had only been in the United States for two months.

The best class I have ever taken at Salem State was Travel Writing, which I took during the spring semester of my sophomore year. For the course, I had to compose a travel essay about

a destination I visited over spring break, as an alternative to not going abroad, I went to Concord, Massachusetts. The trip made me want to explore more local gems, so that summer I created a New England travel blog where every Friday I profiled a new place. When college rolled around in September, I started to neglect my little corner of the Internet.

That Thanksgiving I found an antidote for my doldrums with my parents at the Christmas Farm Inn in Jackson, New Hampshire. Set on a hillside at 3 Blitzen Way, overlooking the White Mountains, the Inn is a country amenity that made me feel as though I was transported to New England's version of the North Pole. Being up in Jackson, which is considered one of the most romantic towns in America, I wanted to bottle everything I was seeing and experiencing. The soft blankets of snow that came down on our drive up on Thanksgiving Eve, the roaring log fires, the Christmas trees that made you huddle beside them like penguins, the snow-capped mountains, and the nearby waterfall: Jackson Falls, which glistened in the snow. Every corner and angle of the town and Inn were begging to be photographed.

Not only did I adore being at the Christmas Farm Inn, so did my stomach! The Inn has an award-winning restaurant under the direction of Executive Chef Stan Shafer, who won "Chef of the Year" by the American Culinary Federation. Having lived strictly off of pasta for three months while living at school, each mouthful was heaven. The Inn is European in that the meals come in courses and you are supposed to take your time. Dining there taught me that one of the most overlooked ways to be happy is to slow down and just be. Staying at the Christmas Farm Inn was one of those occasions where you wished you had a bottomless stomach! On my first night, I ordered the Green Apple Bourbon Steak, the restaurant's bestseller. There are two types of steak, the steaks you eat and the steaks you experience; the Bourbon was the latter. For

dessert, my parents and I split their chocolate bag, which was so rich it was coma-inducing, even when shared with a group!

Though I didn't spend my Thanksgiving in the traditional way I had with my extended family, the trip to Jackson was much needed. I fell in love with New England again, and saw so many things that I discovered it's the tiny moments that flutter by, day after day, that define me. The hardest part is seeing what's right in front of you and holding on to it. When I came home from the Christmas Farm Inn, I wrote my first blog post in ages about the holiday.

Although he wasn't worth my time, I am grateful I met Salar. He revealed to me a stage of naivety. At one point during a text exchange he shared with me his life motto. It was a quote by the poet Mary Oliver- "tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" When I read that quote, I remember it felt as though Salar was directly speaking to me about the way I was leading my life. It was as if he knew that I was too caught up with making my life better for the future, instead of in the present. When I came home from the Christmas Farm Inn, I took the alarm clock from out of my closet, wrote the quote on an index card and placed them both on my nightstand, vowing to take advantage of every moment henceforth.

Disease To Please

Up until this past summer, I was somebody who had been a severe, long-time sufferer of the Disease to Please. If you are a strong-willed person, I'm sure you know at least someone who has it based on these common symptoms: trouble saying no, the need to have everyone like you, fear of conflict, and a smile always on one's face. While there is no specific cause, I believe I contracted the disease as a result of having a formerly rebellious sister and dealing with some unkind classmates during my childhood. To combat the taunts and have a separate identity from my sibling, I became "the nicest person ever." I was so notorious for being overly nice that the mom of my best friend in high school didn't like me because she thought I didn't have a backbone.

My sister Katelyn, who is seven and a half years older than me, has always been in a rush for the next best thing, whether that's hitting a milestone or getting the latest version of something she already owns. You could say my sister approaches life the same way crazy Black Friday shoppers do, waiting right outside the beckoning door ready to snatch everything up in their grasp. When she met her future husband at the age of eighteen, she moved out of our house to live with him in another town. She was a senior in high school and my parents let her go out of fear that they would never see or hear from her again. Before she turned in her key, Katelyn and my parents would have such loud fights over her desperate need for independence that they would lose their voices. As I watched my sister pack her belongings into her beige 2001 Toyota Camry, I promised myself that I wouldn't follow in her turbulent footsteps.

As a child, I had an active imagination. I danced to the beat of my own drum. During my elementary school days, I turned everywhere I went into a makeshift stage-my backyard, room,

aunt's house during reunions- and would sing songs I'd make up on the spot. The songs would be imitations of the sugar-coated pop songs I heard playing on boom boxes. My house is located along a lake that is filled with many people walking, biking, and running it on a nice day. Overtime my classmates discovered what I did every day after school and would tease me saying, *"Did you hear Lisa singing outside of her house? Wasn't she so bad?!"*

Throughout the rest of my schooling, I continued to sing and perform by joining the chorus and drama club. The awful thing about having the Disease to Please is that you never forget any mean thing that happens to you. Though I was young when I was made fun of for singing, the words continued to play on a broken record loop. Even when I was accepted to join the high school chamber singers at the end of eighth grade, an honors class that required an audition, I never had the courage to go for a solo because I didn't think I was talented.

My passion of working with others is what made me interested in becoming an orientation leader for my college after I discovered flyers for the position in my freshman residence hall. I also wanted the job because my orientation group made me feel accepted and I didn't want to return to the grocery store I worked at during high school. Even though becoming an orientation leader would require me to wear ugly polo shirts, the smiles the orientation leaders were wearing on the flyers were wider than any commercial featuring a woman eating yogurt.

To become an orientation leader, I had to go through a group interview. During that process, my belly turned to jello as I started having second thoughts that my disease could ever make me a stand-tall leader. When everyone was asked what the hardest thing they ever had to overcome was, I was worried by my lack of hardships. Some people shared sob stories- one girl had illegal immigrant parents, while another discussed having to become a parental figure when

her dad passed away. Whenever I had to speak, I would stutter and blush profusely. For the final part of the interview, we had to draw on a piece of easel paper what we'd bring to the position. Everyone drew abstract ideas. A brain next to a box indicating they thought outside the box; a pair of ears to illustrate they were good listeners. I drew myself geared up in Salem State apparel with my hand giving a thumbs up.

I thought I blew my interview, but the coordinators must have seen potential in me as I was one of the only students from my year that was not selected as an alternate. Becoming an orientation leader that summer was one of the biggest highlights of 2013. I got to contribute to Salem State's community, confront my fear of heights by going zip-lining during a day team-building at Project Adventure, and meet new people, including one of my best friends, Christen. I found it surprising Christen was one of the alternates. She is the opposite of me: a spitfire. As a criminal justice major, Christen is a person that always stands up to injustice. That September when I told her I still hadn't received my final check, she went straight to human resources to speak with a representative on my behalf.

The next year I ended up working another summer job in order to work the entire break, but got to return to my beloved position the summer before my senior year because I was going on a two-week faculty led study abroad program to Germany that July, which enabled to work orientation during June and August. I wanted my last summer as a student to be life-changing. Through my position as an orientation leader, I wanted to not only provide a memorable first experience for new students, but to also develop thicker skin. While I did grow a bit more confident and self-assured during my first summer, enough to garner notice from friends and family when I came home, I was paired with a partner named Martha who sometimes didn't

allow me to transform as much as I would have liked. Martha is an innately assertive person. Once she saw a line of trepidation crease onto my face, she would step right in and never allow me to rise to the occasion.

It's not surprising I was paired with Martha and that I am such good friends with Christen. Opposites attract. While I admired all of the outspoken women in my life, I started to think having relationships within this dynamic made it difficult for me to stand up as they created a chair on the sidelines that was as comfortable as a bed.

Another reason why I wanted to change so badly was before I went in for my veteran interview I bumped into my former roommate. We became close freshman year because we were both in serious relationships and did the same extracurriculars in high school. At the end of our days, we had each other and our cinder block dorm room while we navigated our first year away from home. However, when we both became single, I felt she traded in her boyfriend to date me. She wanted to do everything with me, and would get aggressively jealous if I hung out with others. On top of feeling like property, I didn't think we had anything in common anymore. I would laugh at things she would say that I didn't think were funny and would refrain from voicing my opinions when I didn't agree with her. Because of my disease and her fiery personality, I didn't know how to talk to her, and one day she called me a "coward" when I decided to stay the night at another friend's dorm after she got mad at me for not giving her enough attention when we went to the mall and movies with other people. We were never able to restore our friendship and nowadays whenever she sees me on campus, she storms past with a sourpuss expression. Receiving the cold shoulder from an old friend is hard when you have the Disease to Please. After our falling out at the end of our sophomore year, I started taking

obscure, long paths to get across campus and skipping dining halls I knew she frequented, even when I was feeling woozy from lack of food, in order to avoid the chance of being near her.

This past summer I was paired with an incoming sophomore named Dan and the two of us made up Group F. With a contagious smile and laugh, Dan is one of the easiest people to get along with that I have ever met. In fact, when we had to take a personality test one of his results was WOO, an acronym that stands for “winning others over.” As happy as I was to be paired with him, I realized over the course of our training that he was the male version of me. I started to feel some pressure that as a veteran Dan would be relying on me to take the reins when things got out of control.

During our first session, we were given a group that was as good as gold. Some of our students were so enthusiastic that they wished orientation lasted an entire week, and they eventually came back to visit Dan and I multiple times throughout the summer. For our second session, we had another good group. They weren’t angels like our first group, although no other group compared to them that summer, so neither Dan nor I had complaints.

It’s a given that every incoming freshman will talk during an informative session on day two. Day one is the day packed with fun festivities- a comedy show about college written and performed by members of the theatre department, a trip to an ice cream store and Salem Willows, a nighttime dance party, and a station to make pennants. Day two is the day that drags like a sloth taking out trash. It is full of informative panels on topics such as financial aid, student IDs, and counseling and health services. If there is one session I will never tolerate disruption it’s when the campus group, CESA (Campus Educators on Sexual Assault), present their program.

It was towards the end of day two and my group was with another group listening to a CESA educator. The students were seated in rows of folding gray metal chairs. All of the orientation leaders were in the back of the room as we were not allowed to interact with the presentation. Like my other orientation leaders I was tired, so I sat on top of a table, tucked my knees up, and laid my head against the cold tile wall to rest my eyes. I had just taken a deep, relaxing breath when I heard laughter and talking. It was three obnoxious boys wearing oversized t-shirts and baseball hats from another group. Just as the CESA presenter's lips were forming to ask the boys to quiet down, my feet, without any recollection of me doing so, took me to the front of the room to take charge. I called them right out, addressing them by their names, and in a steady voice asked them to share what they were talking about as it was "clearly more impactful than teaching young people about rape." Their smirks were instantly wiped away and everyone, including my staff, were stunned silent. Nobody could believe that that the sweet, shy orientation leader had the ability to be so firm.

As I slowly walked back to the table, I could feel the blood in my veins bumping into my heart, which was pounding at horse galloping speed. My skin felt prickly. It was as if I was high. The sensations I was feeling after I confronted the boys made me like I had never lived before.

Perhaps I never had.

The remainder of the CESA presentation went on without any interruptions. The only noise I could hear were all of the things I wished I had retorted in the past throughout my life.

"I'm not going to let what you think stop me."

"I don't agree with you."

"I need help."

“I’m not happy.”

After that incident, I found myself capable of being assertive without second thought. I could channel my inner Christen and Martha, both whom did not return as an orientation leader that summer. I could yell when I had to grab the attention of my whole group, and talk to students individually when they were behaving inappropriately and being distracting. Before that incident, the thought of confronting somebody for their wrongdoing was panic-inducing. I never stood up for anything out of fear I would be viewed as “bitchy” and “cold.” That never ended up being the case. In fact, I actually grew closer to everyone on my staff afterwards. I became the leader with the “mom voice.” Every day of orientation, each leader had to share with the staff who or what filled their metaphorical bucket. The bucket represents your mental and emotional self. When a positive experience happens to you it fills your bucket, and when a negative experience occurs it dips from your bucket. There were several times my fellow peers and bosses said I filled their bucket. It was my personal development and the respect I received from everyone on my staff that made me love myself more than I ever had before. I ended up seeing my old roommate a few times that summer because during lunch on day two the E-board members from all the groups and clubs on campus did tabling and she is the president of one. Each time I had to walk from North Campus to Central Campus dining, my hands trembled less and the lump in throat became smaller. It still isn’t easy to see her; I wish I could say that I still don’t skip eating at certain dining halls and taking round-about-ways to get to classes, but when I was an orientation leader I was able to feel less guilty about us no longer being friends.

I had always been a private person and addressing those boys gave me a wave of confidence that allowed me to show parts of myself I only shared with people nearest to me. It

was like instead of being as a regular image, I became a panoramic. At the end of the summer, when we had to give everyone a handwritten note to fill physical buckets our bosses gave us, most of my orientation staff wrote that they thought my bluntness was funny. It was becoming an orientation leader that has made it easier for me to write this series of personal essays, and later that summer ask my boyfriend when we were just getting to know each other if I was only girl he was interested in.

Being an orientation leader definitely made the summer of 2015 one for the books. I was able to work on my disease and in that process was also able to help Dan become assertive. Once I came out of my shell, he adopted the acronym WWLD, 'What Would Lisa Do,' and found the strength to pull students aside to talk to them when need be. When a girl named Julia in our third group was being too cool for school, Dan went over to her to tell her that Salem State has one of the best college orientation programs and that her negative attitude was bringing down the group. In August, when a boy named Nathan left the theatre performance to grab an Arizona tea from the nearby convenient store, Dan told him that every student had to be present at each session or they would be the last one to register for classes. Being a textbook student athlete, Nathan didn't believe him and when he showed up mid-day to sleep in on day two, Dan spoke to representatives from the Advising Center to see through that he was the last student to register, which was unfortunate because he was in the last orientation session and there was hardly any classes left.

Gaining all I did from being an orientation leader felt necessary for my last summer as a college student. During the academic year, I learned through my English classes how to communicate effectively through writing, and this past summer Salem State taught me how to do

so orally. My college experience has come full circle and I am looking forward to applying the skills I have sharpened at Salem State towards my first job this June. Additionally, I am excited to make progress on my two post-college goals:

I want to get closer to my sister. When you have a significant age gap from your sibling it can be hard to have a close relationship with them growing up due to a lack of commonalities. I believe once I graduate college it will be easier to connect with Katelyn because then I will also be in the real world. With my sister's third and final child on the way, I want to teach her children while they are still young the importance of having a sibling.

The other goal I have is to sing again. When I decided to take a break from performing at the start of college to focus on groups centered in my major, I promised to pick it up again when I graduate by joining a community chorus. Though I got the breakthrough results I wanted, living with the Disease to Please is something I am still working on. I have learned that we all have at least one area in our lives that we must continuously work on, but now that I have found my voice, I am confident I can become a soloist once and for all.

Dachau

When we arrived at Dachau that late July afternoon, we entered the camp the same way the inmates did, through an iron gate. On the gate was the sign that framed every concentration camp gate in the 1940s, 'Arbeit macht frei' (work makes you free). However, I did not get the sensation I had stepped into Germany's chilling past as it was not the original infamous sign. The sign was stolen nine months earlier and the replacement didn't even look old and rotting as I imagined it would be seventy years after it was first cast into a blast furnace. I was finally studying abroad, and Dachau was at the top of my to do list.

Dr. Chris Mauriello of the History department and Dr. Stephen Matchak, chairperson of the Geography department, had been conducting summer excursions to Europe, specifically to see World War I and II sites, since 2000. My friend, Angela, had found the trip for me and I was traveling with Mauriello and Matchak on their fifteenth study and travel institute. Three people who went with them to Poland the previous summer- Jill, Brenden, and Ed, a retired high school teacher- said that going to Majdanek was the most powerful thing they'd ever experienced. "We got to walk through a wooden barrack that held 10,000 prisoners' shoes and were up close to a mausoleum containing human ashes! Everyone cried and not a single person was able to make it through the entire tour."

My mom's best friend Joanne, who is a travel agent and lived in Germany for some time during her childhood, was glad I was going there. In the days leading up to my departure, she gave me an adaptor, a journal, and a book about Dachau. She told me she had some old video footage of Dachau somewhere in her house of when she and her husband, Jim, were in Germany

years ago before they had their two kids. She added that touring Dachau was eerie, but an absolute must.

Prior to our tour of Dachau, we had a two hour bus tour of Munich, which most people, including myself, fell asleep through. We had a monotone guide who never pointed at anything and would talk about eighteen unrelated topics at once. I have never liked bus tours. Though buses do allow you to cover more ground than walking, being in a fast moving vehicle with tinted windows doesn't allow you to see sites properly. It was also still early into the trip and I wasn't yet used to the time difference and drinking more than a liter of beer each night. It was taking everything for sleep to not envelope me every time I sat down, and I eventually gave in when I figured the bus tour was my chance to rest before Dachau. The best part of the bus tour was when Josh, a James Franco look-alike, snorted so loudly he woke himself up.

Something I had not learned before the tour was that most of the camp was destroyed after World War II. Dachau used to have thirty-four barracks and only two were rebuilt to give visitors an insight into the living conditions endured. Gravel filled in the outlines of where the other thirty-two barracks stood. All the prisoners had in the barracks were tables for eating, wooden lockers on the back walls, three-tiered bunk beds, wash bins, and the most basic toilets so I couldn't understand why no money was spent on building all thirty-four barracks when the biggest reason people tour Dachau is to learn and empathize. As soon as I discovered how many replicas there were at the camp, I started to wish I was on a bus where I didn't have the ability to zoom in and see everything for what they were.

Dachau felt like a tourist trap. There was a gift shop outside of the entrance. It carried movies and books about the Holocaust and biographies of famous American Jews, like Woody

Allen and Philip Roth, who had no direct connection to the Holocaust other than being Jewish. Though postcards are popular items in gift shops, I thought they were unsuitable for a former concentration camp. I found myself asking, what the hell would you write in one? *Greetings mom and dad, I survived Dachau?!*

My group and I weren't the only tourists present. In Germany, school children are required to visit concentration camps and we saw a few pack of middle school aged students there on a field trip, their backpacks slumped across their shoulders. In typical teenage fashion, they couldn't have looked less enthusiastic to be there. Some were kicking gravel while others were sneakily trying to get away with conversing.

Everyone in my group stuck to taking photographs of what we saw- the information inside the museum, the crematorium buildings, etc.- rather than inappropriately posing next to them. It felt weird watching a girl about my age strike a peace sign when her friend pulled out her iPhone. At the end of our tour, our guide, a middle aged blonde women, said "let's take a picture." We were standing in front of the International Monument, a sobering sculpture created by Nandor Gild, a Jewish Holocaust survivor and artist, that depicts skeletal prisoners attempting to escape the camp's barbed wires with their heads dangling sharply. The purpose of this monument is to offer the pleading "never again." Before any one of us could decline, she went over to Jesse, the person with the best camera, to take it from him. "Say cheese!" she said rather cheerfully as her finger pressed down on the shutter button. Not a single person smiled.

Our tour guide was another reason why visiting Dachau did not exceed my expectations. Though she was knowledgeable, it was obvious she was pretty drained from her job. At times, the tour felt rushed and as if she couldn't wait for us to see the twenty-two minute documentary

about Dachau from the 1960s, which I'm sure we could have viewed on YouTube. Every frame in the documentary was painful to watch as it proved that the prisoners were in fact stripped of all human rights and dignity while in captivity. The hardest shot to watch was that of newly deceased bodies being dumped into a mound of deteriorating corpses. The Nazi Party moved the bodies as carelessly as construction workers transferring dirt in their excavators. When the lights came up at the end and everyone slowly rose from their seats, I was disappointed that the most terrifying images I saw at a concentration camp were delivered to me on a screen. At the same time, the documentary's crackling black and white footage made it hard for me to conceive that 31,000 people had died where I was sitting.

Of all the inappropriate things our tour guide did, the worse was when she said Dachau wasn't a part of the Holocaust. Though it is not classified as an extermination camp like Majdanek, Dachau was the first camp! It opened in March of 1933, two months after Hitler became chancellor, and was the very place the Nazi Party tested out its cruel, sadistic methods of torture. I'm sure the International Committee of Dachau, the non-profit organization founded by former prisoners who fund Dachau, wouldn't have been thrilled to hear that. Our guide made me wish the Committee did more evaluations of their employees because Dachau isn't the easiest place to work at. Its history definitely takes a toll on the guides and thus their performances.

The most authentic part of Dachau was an area one wouldn't imagine. Buried behind the distressingly clean gray concrete buildings was the most beautiful garden of flowers. Jasmines, lilacs, roses, and whimsical green vines camouflaged the firing wall where the SS shot and killed thousands of prisoners. I was grateful that there were no other tour groups around. The garden

was the most intimate moment of Dachau because it was untouched. The scene was the perfect example of beauty meeting tragedy.

This collection of personal essays was not the original idea I had for my honors thesis. I was initially going to write a collection of essays dedicated to my time abroad. However, whenever I sat down to write, I found myself at a lost for words. I wrote a series of posts on my blog in the hopes of gaining inspiration, including one about Dachau, but it didn't make a difference. In my post about Dachau, I wrote that the camp had been restored so realistically, it gave me the haunting sensation that I had stepped back into the grisly past. Whilst writing this new thesis, I have since deleted that blog post. A thesis is a capstone in academia, and as an English major, it is important for me to use this project as a vehicle to develop and strengthen my voice. Having the Disease to Please used to make me feel I could never say anything negative about visiting a concentration camp until I started work on this thesis three months ago. The fact is I didn't walk out of Dachau crying or with a new affirmation for life, and that's okay.

Dachau was so structured and commercialized that I wasn't able to process it. I could only see sites and read information for so long before I had to make room for the other groups, and was also restricted from exploring the camp the way I wanted to because of my guide. As a traveler, this disabled me from adding my story to a larger one. From my first time abroad, I have learned that if you label a future event with an expectation, regardless of it being with high or low hopes, it will never live up to what you imagined as there will always be an aftertaste of it not unfolding as you planned in your mind. A couple of days before the trip when I was talking to Dr. Mauriello, we both agreed we are the type of people who plan way too much. I have always been a list maker. Creating countless ones to serve as the script for my life. Being let

down at Dachau reminded me that no good script has ever been written in one draft without any revisions. I can't live my life clinging to my lists because some of the most influential moments in life are not created through intense planning and high expectations attached to them.

Jim

On my college trip to Germany, I met the only person I've ever been able to compare to the character Sloth from the movies, *The Goonies*: Jim. Before one gets to know him, he can come across rather intimidating- he is tall, never goes anywhere without a gun, and in one of our earlier conversations, described how he had been sued multiple times by patients from the hospital he works at as a security guard. Though those are enough details to make a person deliberate running towards the hills, in reality, Jim is the biggest teddy-bear one could ever meet, with a unique and charming child-like world outlook.

Before I left for Germany, I never envisioned I would spend most of my time abroad with my new friend. I've always been a girl whose closest friends are girls. I like being girly: I enjoy ordering margaritas, talking about beauty routines, and marathoning episodes of *Pretty Little Liars*. My roommate was the only other girl in my age group on the trip, but we seldom spent time together while our group explored Heidelberg, Munich, Nuremberg, Dresden, and Berlin. Even though it was a faculty-led trip, it was also opened to the public. We had high school teachers on the trip so they could receive accreditation (one of the teachers, Ryan, brought his father, Bill, who lived in Germany when he was in the army), retired teachers, and a history professor from Emmanuel College amongst the undergraduate and graduate students from Salem State.

A decade earlier, Jim received his Bachelor's degree for Criminal Justice from Salem State. That May he had graduated from his alma mater with his Masters in Teaching History. Because of Jim's first impressions can be grandiose, his academic career had been mildly tumultuous. His passion, at times, can be misunderstood. The coordinator of his Masters program

nearly kicked him out after he brought in real Nazi memorabilia to aid his lesson plan on the Holocaust. He is not a racist; he used them to engage his students. Fortunately, one of the professors conducting our trip, Dr. Mauriello, stood up for Jim. He was able to stay in the program, but was prohibited from taking the practicum with his classmates, which would have provided Jim the opportunities to observe classrooms and student teach.

Even on our trip, which was full of caricatures, Jim still faced some whiplash. He always got people to listen to his outrageous stories, but not everyone took him seriously, especially when he told us all about a fake party that involved diapers and laxatives.

Sometimes when people travel, they don't just go to escape reality, but also themselves. The reason I didn't engage me much with my roommate, Jill was because of the stories she told. I was turned off every time I heard her explain to people the reason she should be called 'Princess' was because some Irish guy at a bar had once called her that before throwing her over his shoulders and that she calls 'Thanksgiving' 'Jill-sgiving' because she was born on the holiday. I started commuting to college the spring semester of my junior year after I found the college lifestyle old and missed the comforts of home, but for whatever reason my mom was happy I was going to have a roommate on the trip. I think she found it as another opportunity for me to make a college friend, but I was on the trip to see another world outside of my home and college town.

The first time I valued Jim was during our first night in Nuremberg when everyone was drinking at an underground bar. I was sitting next to Jill and across from us sat the high school teacher Ryan and Steve, a thirty year old former soldier, who was an incoming senior.

"Making out means nothing to me anymore. I always make out with at least one guy at every bar I go" said Jill.

I wasn't drunk, but pretended to be as I retorted, "why doesn't that surprise me."

It was silent for a moment before Steve said, "well, Jill's pretty."

In a beat, Jill waved her hand, which she used all the time when talking, and picked the conversation back up.

My face grew red and I quickly picked up my beer to drink. I had never been so grateful to be drinking.

Before that incident, I was fighting back tears the whole evening. I was upset because I had lost my digital camera earlier that day, which had 300 pictures on it, and everywhere I sat that day I ended up being near Jill who kept sharing stories that just made me feel inferior. A recent graduate, Jill was asking others that day whether she should be a nanny for a family that was going to spend the next two years traveling the world or take a teaching position. It was our fifth day in Germany, and although I was hitting my limit in the amount of days I can go without having time to myself, I missed my friend, Christen, who I knew would be the perfect person to talk crap about Jill with. Funny enough, when I came home I found out the two went to elementary and middle school together and didn't get along.

Just when I was thinking about leaving and walking back to our hotel, Jim sat down next to me and started telling me stories about his job and the prostitute who lived above his apartment who kept him awake at night but whom he couldn't report to the police as he is an unlicensed firearms instructor. "Hey if you ever come to America and want to learn how to shoot guns, here's my card," he would say to people in Germany when he gave out the business cards his wife made.

I was so appreciative of what Jim did that night. He could tell I wasn't having it, but instead of mortifying me by asking if I was okay in front of everyone, he just came over casually to make me feel better. Although I was missing my friend back in the States, when he came over to tell his shameless stories I found that moment cemented him as my friend. Like Jill, he was a hand talker, thrusting both of his giant hands to illustrate what he was talking about, but unlike her, he didn't tell a story to put on some kind of popularity badge.

Jim is also a highly animated person and there was no better moment that illustrated that point than when the group toured the Dresden Military Museum, a museum that focuses on the impact war has had on history, culture, and anthropology. I was on the third floor with Michael and Josh examining instruments that were played by military members when all of sudden Jim came out of the elevator and charged towards us.

"Did you guys see the snake upstairs? It was coolest thing I've ever seen!" Jim proclaimed, his thumb pointing back to the elevator. The three of us looked at him confused so he ushered us back up the elevator with him.

The snake was from an abstract, stop-motion animated film by Martha Colburn on the fourth floor. Colburn's film wasn't easy to watch with its frantic, bursts of violence, and the 'snake' bit was rather anticlimactic after we waited ten minutes for it to come back on screen, but it was worth seeing Jim full of glee. It made me think, when was the last time I got so excited about something. I realized it was when I was a child. I started to have flashbacks of childhood moments when I was bursting with excited. The first time I rode my bike without training wheels; swimming like a fish in my family's old above ground pool; mastering the bunny ear method of tying shoes.

During the fall semester of my junior year, a period where I started to lose my spark for life, one of my favorite professors, Dr. Richard Elia, gave my British Literature class a piece of advice that I have only seen Jim exhibit. He said to live a good, happy life you must view the world through the eyes of a child. I found after that night in Nuremberg, Jim gave me a camera with a set of new lens.

When I landed in Boston at the end of the two weeks, I couldn't wait to share with my friends all that I experienced whilst abroad- going inside the castles that inspired fairy tales, dining at the the famous beer hall the Hofbräuhaus, and even singing in front of some members of the group at a bar on our last night. The more time I spent with Jim, I more realized he possessed the same traits as my girlfriends. Though I couldn't talk to him about clothes or guys, like my closest friends he is an extrovert, confident, and loves to make others laugh.

Children have a special kind of optimism. They are blissfully unfazed by the opinions of others. As we age, we become more self-conscious. It's easy to assume that the child-like courage we once had has disappeared entirely, but whenever we need to, we can consciously channel it. We are our own biggest critics, and whenever I find myself having seeing my value, I try talking to myself the way I would talk to my five-year-old self, addressing myself with kindness, compassion, and gentleness, which is precisely how we all deserve to be spoken to.

Climbing Camel's Hump

Camel's Hump is Vermont's third highest mountain and highest undeveloped peak at 4,083 feet. It is called Vermont's best mountaintop because on a clear day you can see Mount Marcy, the highest in New York; Mount Washington, the highest in the Northeast; all of Lake Champlain; Burlington, Vermont's largest city; and quite a bit of Vermont's countryside. Camel's Hump is situated on the famous Long Trail, which stretches from the Appalachian Mountains to the Canadian Border, and is such a significant symbol to the Green Mountain State it was featured on the state quarter in 2001.

Michael and I had been dating for two months and much of what catapulted our relationship was going on walks through nature reservations in our area. The most intense hiking we had done prior to Camel's Hump was getting to the top of the highest point in Breakheart Reservation in Saugus, Massachusetts- Eagle Rock. We climbed Eagle Rock on Labor Day, and the 268 foot vista provided us with scenes of Boston, New Hampshire, and parts of Western Massachusetts. It was a sticky, hot day and I could barely hike straight as I had drank two bottles of Smuttynose's IPA that Michael snuck in. I was excited to share my first experience hiking a mountain with Michael as he has an extensive hiking background, reaching his first mountain top as a tiny baby in a carrier. He has hiked over thirty peaks in New York multiple times and for five years led wilderness excursions through the Adirondacks when he served as a camp counselor.

I met Michael while studying abroad. The first time we ever hung out was when we went swimming in Munich's Isar River in the early hours of the morning after a night of bar hopping. It was his idea, Mr. Spontaneous. What attracted me to Michael the fact he made me unafraid to confront the unexpected. Even though I was unsure then if it was legal or not to swim in the

river, and felt a bit self-conscious about having to strip down into my mismatched underwear in front of a guy I knew had a crush on me, I took the dive anyways after realizing, when in Munich! We had to walk over some sharp rocks to get back to the mainland. I kept stabbing my feet and swearing, and Michael was the only person to stay behind as the three other people who swam with us had left. Once he came over and put his arm on my waist, I never felt more stable on ground. Michael was laying down the foundation that would pave the road for our relationship.

Walking has always been my favorite form of exercise, so I figured hiking would be a natural evolution for me. Every summer, I make it a goal to walk Lake Quannapowitt first thing every morning. Two hundred and seventy-five acres of shallow water, the Lake is the main attraction in my hometown of Wakefield, Massachusetts. I enjoy walking because it allows me to clear my head and feel revitalized. After I came home from Germany, I started walking the Lake twice to maintain the seven miles I did each day overseas. While I was abroad, I saw so many Germans that could have been models, and of course I tried my hardest not to gawk whenever one passed by.

Before 2015, I counted myself lucky I had never been hugely dissatisfied with my body, but as I was getting ready for the New Year's Eve Party my friend was hosting, that perception started to change. While I was pouring some foundation on the back of hand to paint my face, I jumped and nearly split the liquid product all over me, as I noticed for the first time in the mirror that my chin appeared rounder. According to every magazine I've read, I have a round face, but for the first time I noticed my jawline wasn't as sharp as I previously perceived it. Each New Year's Eve can make us feel old, but at twenty-one-years-old I wasn't expecting to find a wakeup

call so soon; my body's metabolism was slowing down, and it sent aftershocks through my psyche.

It was a beautiful October Saturday the day Michael and I hiked Camel's Hump. We had ventured up to Vermont, which was my first time visiting the state, to not only hike but so I could also meet his parents. The weather was as crisp as a ripe apple and the sun was still out delivering its kisses. Because the weather was not frightfully cold and I had never hiked a mountain before, all I packed for the excursion was my gray Salem State t-shirt, a lightweight charcoal colored sweatshirt, black yoga pants, gray sneakers with peach pink laces, and my mammoth blue LL Bean backpack. When my boyfriend's mom discovered how ill prepared I was, she was quick to retrieve more clothes to help me stay insulated, including a purple cheetah printed winter hat and a forest green fleece jacket. I already didn't look perfectly put together like a fitness guru on Instagram, and with the warm additions kindly supplied by her, I thought to myself, *but when did I ever?*

Never.

Michael and I hiked the Burrows Trail, the oldest trail. Although the trail is 4.8 miles round trip, approximately a mile longer than Lake Quannapowitt, climbing Camel's Hump was more difficult. When I took Dr. Elia for Honors Literature, he taught me that when a character in literature climbs a mountain it symbolizes a spiritual journey, and boy was Camel's Hump a spiritual journey! Michael told me at the check-in post that there would be times that day I wouldn't love hiking so much, which ended up being true. I wasn't able to ponder life the way I could at the Lake. I had to think strategically about how I was going to get around rocks or tree

roots so I wouldn't fall, as well as remind myself to breathe and not think negatively when others passed me. In a way, I was practicing self-care.

As with life, hiking can be disorientating at times, and what blew me away the most, besides the breathtaking view from the top, was how encouraging all the other hikers were! Words of "don't give up, you're almost there" were as constant as the sounds of our feet crunching down on Vermont's famous Fall foliage. This support was especially helpful during the descent, when my hands were so numb from the bitingly cold air all I wanted to do was cry. I never felt judged for my lack of mountain hiking experience, even when I had to get on all four to crab shuffle on the icy patches or ask Michael for his hand.

It felt especially wonderful hiking my first mountain with Michael when we did. Exactly a week before the hike, we said 'I love you' for the first time and on the day of the hike I met his parents. Though we are still infatuated with one another now, six months since climbing Camel's Hump, the truth is there will come a day when the butterflies are gone and we will have to work every day to maintain our foundation. The climb re-instilled three of the most important ingredients necessary for a healthy relationship- communication, patience, and support.

Even if you're single, hiking is still a worthwhile experience. Above all that happened that day, hiking a mountain gave me confidence because it made me admire my body for how strong it is! My legs were sore the next day when I woke up, but my body worked hard to repair itself, and a couple of days later they were as good as new. In our society, it is so easy for a woman to only value her body if she looks picture perfect, fits into designer clothes, or has a significant other. Women cannot allow themselves to think that is the reason they were even besotted a body. The relationship we have with our body is by far the most important one of all

because it our most loyal, lifelong companion. Our bodies never leave us, and when push comes to shove, they don't stop working to heal us until we're okay.

To Capture A Stake Again

When I was first getting to know Michael, I nearly stopped myself from dating him because I was too embarrassed by my lack of political knowledge and involvement. Michael is a History major, and politics are one of the main things he thinks about on a daily basis in addition to food and sleep. Standing up for social injustices runs in his family; his parents met in college while protesting against the Vietnam War, and he himself has participated in some, including Occupy Wall Street. I, on the other hand, grew up in a household that didn't vote or ever discuss politics. On our first date, Michael brought up that he hated Ronald Reagan, but because all I knew about Reagan was that he was a former actor and George H. W. Bush's predecessor, I just nodded "mmm." My whole life I had wanted to be well-informed, but never thought I would have a political identity because I didn't know what sources to trust.

I didn't vote in the first presidential election I was eligible for. In November of 2012, I was a freshman at Salem State and Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were running for the Oval Office. The night of the election I went with my then boyfriend, Anthony, to a bar to play trivia with him and his friends. When Anthony asked if I voted that day, I responded I did an absentee ballot. He and his friends were all seniors in college, and while they anxiously awaited the news of our next President over the TV, they used the moments we weren't deliberating answers to discuss what they voted for on each question. Trivia is one of my favorite games; I know an abundance of random information and am usually the MVP for every team I am apart of. After a long day of classes, I wanted nothing more than for our team to focus on the game, instead of conversing about important information I couldn't answer. Although Anthony later told me that

he thought I was ambitious and hardworking enough to make me president someday, that night at the bar was the one and only time I ever heard him talk about politics.

Suffice to say, I was nervous to confess to Michael my secret, but Angela told me that if Michael was as nice as I was preaching, he wouldn't think less of me; and as she is about most things, Angela was right. In fact, as a hopeful teacher Michael was more than happy to break down politics for me. On our second date, we talked about his biggest political issue, income inequality. He was close to his paternal grandfather, who was a part of the Labor Movement. As he explained to me that the awful water crisis in Flint, Michigan is a product of capitalism because large companies, motivated by profit, privatized the water industry a chill went down my spine that the events in the musical I was in in high school, *Urinetown*, had a possibility of happening. The creators of the musical came up with the idea while traveling Europe and encountering their pay-per-use-toilet policy, which I did experience in Germany. *Urinetown*, though, is a satirical musical about a business tycoon that monopolizes all toilets in a city of severe poverty after it is has been inflicted with a serious drought. Any character who didn't pay to pee were sent to "Urinetown," also known as their death. In April of 2016, a woman who was one of the leading people behind the Flint crisis lawsuit, was killed inside a townhouse with another women. I learned this news not through mainstream media, but through Reddit, a website Michael introduced me to where users can share news stories often left out of news programs. In my Social Media and Collaborative Writing class this semester, we watched the Netflix documentary, *Inside The Hunt for The Boston Bombers*, where I learned it was users on Reddit, not the FBI, who identified the bombers of the 2013 Boston Marathon.

Michael has not only supplied me articles and discussed books with me he has read to help me become more informed, he also uses his favorite medium, music. I think a person's favorite musical genre can say a lot about the person, and I think that is true of Michael. I never liked rap music before I got to know him, but Michael doesn't listen to the Top 40 hits that exploit women and center on partying and excessive wealth; he likes underground/indie rappers, such as Lauryn Hill, Kool AD, and Killer Mike, whose works are social commentaries. Michael has taught me that rap music is self-aware and that the reason it can be difficult to listen to some songs is they echo the struggles of their artists. What I like most about rap is how autobiographical it can be. I feel I have gotten to know rappers on a deeper level than I have when I have listened to artists of other genres. The most powerful rap song Michael ever shared with me was "Patriot Act" by Heems. Heems is of Punjabi-Indian descent and his song details the nauseating ways Middle Easterners were treated after 9/11. Some of the hardest lines to listen to include "And our parents began to fear for our lives whenever we walked out the door/ Because they read the news, and another cab driver was beaten to death" and "And yesterday, more than 10 years later, another man from the neighborhood was deported."

Becoming more informed about the world through my relationship with Michael and being on the cusp of graduating from college, I began to care who the next Commander-in-Chief would be. Of the 2016 presidential candidates, the one I am most sick of hearing about is Donald Trump. No matter how hard I try, I can't escape him. He is all over social media and TV, and his name is mentioned in nearly every conversation I am in or listening to. I don't want to be governed by somebody who has no sense of accountability or shame, let alone a person that is sexist, racist, and a narcissist.

According to the Tyndall Report, coverage of Donald Trump accounted for one third of all news coverage in 2015. Trump received 327 minutes of coverage, which is more coverage than the entire Democratic contest combined. Hillary Rodham Clinton was the second most newsworthy candidate at 121 minutes, with an additional 88 minutes devoted to the controversy over her e-mails as Secretary of State and 29 minutes to the investigations into the Benghazi Consulate attack. A candidate who was noticeably under covered was Bernie Sanders. Vice President Joe Biden had 73 minutes of coverage for deciding to not run for President last year, which is more than three times the amount of coverage Sanders received at 20 minutes. It is essential in an election year to hear how policies will affect people and our media is doing a huge disservice to us by not providing that. I know if it wasn't for Michael, I wouldn't feel equipped to vote this time around. The specials the media project onto us have as little substance as the reality show, *The Apprentice*, that made the demagogue a household name.

During the beginning of January 2016, an unexpected opportunity came knocking on my door. The account strategist from a New York based media company called Capture, which makes it possible for media clients, such as *CNN* and the *Huffington Post*, to receive live coverage of events from smartphones, had discovered my blog and was wondering if I could cover an event in Burlington, Vermont on January 7th. At first I thought it was some kind of hoax, so I texted Michael. He told me that was the day Trump was coming to Burlington for a rally and that I needed to find out if the requested coverage would entail me promoting Trump or not. After I learned my job would require me filming protesters through an e-mail correspondence, I said yes. I couldn't believe my first freelance gig would entail me filming like-

minded people for media outlets and that this established company was the one who reached out to me!

At four that day, I walked to Downtown Burlington with Michael and his parents. News vans were parked in every available spot near the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. There were people holding anti-Trump banners, and the shop owner next to the Flynn even spelt out “Trump Listens To Nickleback” on his window. Meanwhile, snaked all the way down the block adjacent to the Flynn were 2,000 attendees waiting to get in. Despite the frenzy, the protests didn't escalate till Trump took the stage at seven. By then, white candles were lit, anti-Trump newsletters were being distributed, and individuals with megaphones started leading the vocal crowds into the following chants- “Racist, Sexist, Anti-Gay! Donald Trump Go Away!”; “Get Your Hate Out Of Our State!”; “Love Trumps Hate!”; “We Are The 99%!” There was also a band consisting of brass instruments and a drum line who were playing. The protesters would erupt into cheers each time somebody got kicked out for being disruptive. When people started trickling out of the Flynn at nine, the Trump opposers started shouting, “Walk Of Shame.” Streaming live footage from my iPhone to media outlets, I felt I had found my voice in American politics. Instead of filming offensive Trump “saying it as it is,” I got to expose who he really is and show the importance of our media reporting on events as they actually were.

It is critical to always fact check what you hear or read. Unfortunately, we can't just believe anything somebody says just because they are a reporter or some other knowledgeable person. When my study abroad group had to go on a bus tour in Berlin, our tour guide said that Hitler was still alive and living in South America. Imagine if you knew nothing about World War II! You would have believed the guide because it is her profession to spread information!

While abroad, I discovered there are many parallels between America and Germany. Both America and Germany have fractured diverse regions, used an eagle as a symbol, prejudice towards minorities, and a division between the North and South. When I brought this up, Dr. Mauriello said Germany is in fact a very Americanized country. Having learned about the horrors Germans acted out and endured during the eras of World War II, my goal was to prevent America from having that same fate. I do not want Muslims to face discrimination, nor would I like a wall erected dividing America and Mexico. Places like Dachau and US internment camps weren't always around; they arose when people used hate speeches to divide a country's ideology into "us vs. them."

Reflections

As my essay on Dachau revealed, *Navigating My Life: Memoirs of a College Student* was not my initial honors thesis. I was originally going to write a series of travel essays laid out in a magazine I would design with Adobe Indesign. However, I found it challenging to write about the trip. The reason for that was I had too many expectations. I expected I would come back from Germany with all these stories waiting to be written down. When you put that unrealistic of an expectation on yourself, you're just setting yourself up to fail. I am proud of all the essays I wrote about Germany for this project. The biggest revelation I gained from this thesis is that inspiration slips in and out. The best way to find your muse is to let life happen to you.

I think my biggest strength is my ability to apply literary devices to my personal stories. I aimed to use metaphors to show bigger pictures and I feel each essay possess energy, tension, imagery, and insight. The hardest part of writing each essay was nailing the conclusions, which I think are my pieces' biggest weakness. I struggle with wrapping things. If I could change anything about my thesis it would be to add more dialogue. "Jim" is the only essay I featured dialogue, and I like reading dialogue because I find hearing how a character talks provides them with more depth.

The goal of these essays were to be an extension of my journal entries. Despite being an English major, I wasn't able to successfully maintain a journal until the summer before my sophomore year of college. I had attempted one in the past, but would always get too lazy and tired to update it. After spending a big chunk of the summer of 2013 hitting subscribe to too many YouTubers who documented their lives and watching the TV series, *The Carrie Diaries*, I decided to stop putting my journal in the backseat and to become a serious practitioner of the

medium once and for all. I would say that journaling is hands down the best thing I have ever done for myself. Writing in a journal has not only benefitted me in capturing the little moments my brain would have most likely lost forever, but it is also a place I can escape to be completely raw and honest. Maintaining a journal has improved my life by helping me find the positives in negative situations, draw parallels, and serve as a timeline of my evolution.

Writing *Navigating My Life* was a labor of love. It was my favorite thing I wrote in college, and I enjoyed every part of the process- outlining, writing, workshopping, and revising- because I wrote it for myself. I love that my thesis is a more developed narrative of the most defining times in my college experience. I hope to write more creative nonfiction in the future.