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The Roof With No Ceiling: Couch Surfing and the New Vagabond's Trek Through Nation-States, Cyberspace, and Global Consciousness

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Nation-states, Cyberspace, and Global Consciousness**

Kathryn Giroux

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Acknowledgements

While it may seem “natural” for me to travel now, it was not always a “natural” prospect for someone with my background. Growing up in a working-class family, my brother and I have never been in want of necessities, but we have also been raised with the knowledge and value that our parents could simply not afford more than that. If we want a car we must earn the money to buy one. If we want to go to college we must start saving now. The path, which was a luxury in itself for having been blocked from our parents’ opportunities, was straight and narrow: get a degree, find a good job. All of our time and money investments were judged on the basis of their utility for this ultimate goal. Thus “travel” was a distant concept for my family, a luxurious expenditure attached to the rich or the reckless. I always have been the most reckless member of my family, so maybe that’s why I was the first to jump on a plane to cross that ocean.

In order to reach that plane seat, I first had to overcome the financial and psychological obstacles that once prevented me from having the means, or conviction, necessary to translate “travel” from a foreign fantasy into a realistic possibility. First, I’d like to thank my mother, whose role in shaping my values of self-reliance, self-realization, and self-empowerment was crucial for me to internalize travel as an attainable goal. As a single, working mother, she has been a remarkable role model of self-sufficiency and a dedicated parent who has sacrificed everything to provide me with the opportunities that she never had for herself. Furthermore, after she made the decision to go back to school, one of the top items on her bucket list, she has inspired me in every way as a woman of immeasurable strength and drive. Without her unconditional love and support, I would have never been able to travel as far as I have today.

After the conviction was planted to pursue the top item on my own bucket list, there were two other major influences that secured my seat on the plane: my aunt and uncle and the Lee Honors College. While still in the process of researching internship programs abroad, my aunt and uncle offered to pay for my program, food, and transportation fees so that I would choose based on merit rather than cost. They didn't want me to limit myself merely by the question of money, but rather, hoped for me to select a program that fit me best. Not only was I incredibly touched and humbled by their generosity, but I now have them to thank for the wonderful direction that my internship took, a direction that may have been otherwise barred by my budget.

I also have the Lee Honors college to thank for both its psychological and financial influences. Since freshman year, the LHC's idea of the "distinctive student," emphasizing the importance of global competence through study abroad, has been a principle shaping my educational goals. Moreover, the LHC aids in the realization of this goal by offering several scholarships for research abroad, including the \$2,500 Honors Thesis Research Scholarship which I was awarded. The scholarship covered the rest of the necessary costs for my trip, and provided me with the morale and confidence to follow through with a project that was both unconventional and personally engaging. Armed with creative and financial flexibility, I would like to thank the Honors College for expanding my thesis possibilities, as well as for opening my mind to see outside of the perceived limitations of my own box.

Finally, after all was said and done, I'd like to thank my thesis committee for all of the work that they put into editing my thesis drafts, and all of the thoughtful guidance they offered to help me steer and actualize a piece that I can now take pride in. In

particular, I'd like to especially thank my thesis chair, Scott Friesner, who spent countless hours and cups of coffee carefully sifting through my drafts. As a mentor, he has encouraged my "voice within" to amplify from an uncertain stutter to a confident resonance. As an editor, he has challenged me to delve deeper, advised me in sections where I became lost, and greatly refined and improved my writing style and skills overall. But as a person, I was drawn to Scott as my thesis chair specifically because I had the greatest respect and admiration for his ability to maintain his unique personality, quirks and unconventionality in his professional environment. And while these characteristics may not seem relevant to my thesis, I believe that they had a great impact on my own ability and belief that I could do the same.

Introduction

The ability to distinguish between “stranger” and “friend” has historically, in part, served as a survival skill. The stereotype of French culture’s “cold-shoulder” toward strangers is based in the fact that, before the twentieth century, the majority of visitors were armed soldiers with the intention of conquest (Briere and Wylie, 28). A more grotesque example is how Native Americans quickly learned to beware of their slaughter by white settlers, and the same held true for any other country’s native inhabitants that had to beware of strangers for crimes, like slavery, in colonialism. Today, the distinction still lingers in our education system, with the warnings of “stranger danger” taught to United States children, and it has furthermore developed from a physical safety “survival skill” and into a “survival skill” for the cultural, social, and nationalist unity of a given group.

Yet at the same time, the distinction’s power is also beginning to diminish. Economies integrate, cultures hybridize, national problems escalate into international crises, and each country, neighbor, and stranger becomes more deeply impacted in a system of interdependence difficult to untangle. Strangers are not as distant as they once were, and strangers have more in common than they acknowledge. In fact, non-zero sum solutions may depend more on the trans-national identification, tolerance, and cross-cultural connection of strangers than most foresee.

For Casey Fenton, not only is the cross-cultural connection of strangers a vital component for promoting the peaceful integration of nations, it is also a vital component for one’s personal life enrichment. He advocates opening doors to strangers as a means of opening doors to interesting leeway for inspiration, connection, and growth. His trust

in the power of strangers drove the creation of a website unique to the present age of Globalization, and central to this thesis, known as www.couchsurfing.org.

CouchSurfing.org is a social networking website that connects strangers across the globe. A “surfer” may search for a “host” in any location of travel, and request to sleep on their couch with the promise of free accommodation in exchange for a unique opportunity to meet new friends, experience new cultures, and build a global community based on diversity and meaningful connections. Today, couch surfing has extended to every continent with active participants in over 200 different countries and territories.

Co-founder Casey Fenton first conceived the website’s idea on a voyage to Iceland. A little strapped on cash and travel companions, Fenton spammed University of Reykjavik students with a mass email, a mass request to find a couch to crash on and a tour guide to unravel the underground city scenes. The response was overwhelming as invitations poured in from students eager to engage with a new traveler, or perhaps just bored with their local routine.

Five years later, Casey, along with Daniel Hofferer, Sebastian Le Tuan, and Leonardo Bassani da Silveira, co-founded the official, online network centered around this concept of social-oriented travel. On CouchSurfing.org, users have a profile page similar to Facebook. They fill in their details: age, gender, education, occupation, personal summary, hobbies, music preference and so on. But they also include other details, such as if they have a couch available or not, how many people their couch will accommodate, preferred gender, and if sleeping spaces are to be shared. Three distinctive factors are particularly interesting about this arrangement:

First, this is free accommodation, offered voluntarily, and thus reflects a counter

reaction to a world that has become more and more dominated by the Westernized value of free market capitalism. While we see trends toward the commoditization of ideas, CouchSurfing.org represents an alternative movement. It is an INGO that counteracts these trends with the de-commoditization of travel accommodation.

Secondly, there is the issue of trust. Raised in the era of “stranger danger,” with increasing xenophobia from miscued projections of crime through the media, as well as increased nationalist sentiments in response to issues of terrorism and illegal immigration, it seems unlikely that this sort of community could exist, let alone thrive. The predominant assumption has been to cast out a stranger, “the other,” from one’s circle of trust. “The other” is someone we must be suspicious of, because we never know if “the other” is truly a serial killer - a rapist - a terrorist, a crook, or a drug dealer.

The final curious aspect about CouchSurfing’s arrangement is the central role that social interaction plays in the exchange. CouchSurfing.org does not present itself as a charity for travelers. On the contrary, the mission statement specifically states -

“to create inspiring experiences.”

So while the exchange may not involve monetary value, stimulating social interaction serves as the common currency. The product of transaction is an interesting social experience. CouchSurfing does not act as a one-sided transaction donating accommodation for “the good” of the backpacking cause. Rather, it is clearly predicated to be an exchange of mutual benefit, and the benefits for the host are assumed to be equal to those of the surfer. Thus for the host, the value and desire for social interaction

outweighs the value and desire for money or some other sort of tangible, manufactured good.

I initially discovered the website through second-hand accounts from a friend-of-a-friend. And while this friend-of-a-friend similarly discovered the website through word-of-mouth, I had imagined that this particular group had original knowledge of the site simply because they were some of those “wild sorts” that most of us resent as much as we envy. By this, I mean that the friend-of-a-friend dropped out of college to embark on a twelve month, train-hopping, cross-country cavort to California. His social group of student-ghetto squatters were designated “The Crusties,” or individually called “A Crusty Kid,” for nicknames, if that doesn’t provide further insight into the characterization of their lot.

I, however, am not “A Crusty Kid,” and I never have been. My life has been structured within the necessary confines and disciplined routine required of a college student, admittedly, more so than I’ve felt comfortable withstanding, and more so than is natural for me. Thus when I first heard of “The Crusties” adventures through CouchSurfing, I took the new insight quietly and slipped it into the left breast pocket of my consciousness, closest to my heart where it could stir and rile me as it might.

As I approached the summer dividing my Junior from my final year of university, I finally decided to rebel against the awful, predictable, passion-filing, color-draining, soul-strangling conformism that had controlled my life the past three years. I would travel. I would shed my past life of subtle and scheduled and square like an old suit coat. I would intern in Barcelona for three months, and travel in France for one month, loosen my tie, see what’s out there, and breathe a little.

But the allure of CouchSurfing had not been buried under the allure of merely working in Barcelona. I didn't just want to work and live and breathe in Barcelona. I wanted to bring my experience in Barcelona alive, I wanted to interact with it, to draw it from the flat sand and build it into a castle molded with the direct contact of hand to water to sand. At the same time, I was searching for an outlet of originality, for passion, through which I might filter my senior Honors thesis. My major is International Studies, so I debated relevant topics in the field, such as Catalan nationalism, yet my Creative Writing minor and inherent nature deterred me from settling for a project that didn't stink of the soot and soul of something more unusual, more strange.

And then I made the connection.

My calling, so it seemed to me, was to meld my curiosity about CouchSurfing and my duty of thesis-writing into one single pursuit, thus creating a process that could not only be scholarly, but simultaneously personal. In the words of the proverb, I decided to search for "a forest in an acorn," to discover the personal repercussions behind the political implications of globalization. Through my self-submergence in this single, transnational community, maybe I could tap into the inner workings of our global community and the global consciousness of vagabonds as a whole.

Once I had officially decided, and received departmental approval, I was anxious in some ways, but relieved in others. My subjects of study were known as wanderers, nomads, free-spirits, globe-trotters, world travelers, and drifters. Initially, I felt no stability. How can one predict if crossing paths with a stranger will lead to enlightened clearings or dark dead ends? On a personal level of concern, I had never traveled by myself within the United States, let alone in another country. Even when I "left the nest"

for college, I may not have brought my baby blanket, but it was worse; I had brought my best friend.

On the other hand, I had that gut assertion that this was what I needed. I took comfort in my own prevalent intuition telling me that something important, something valuable, maybe transformational would come out of it. At least, I told myself, I would discover how bonds are formed between a group of people lacking a shared background, culture, ethnicity, language, descent, religion, or social contacts. At worst, CouchSurfing wouldn't provide me, nor my thesis, with any insight beyond a few, odd stories. But at the very most, I might successfully slip into my identity as a CouchSurfer and thrive within the community. At the very most, I might embark on a journey of self-discovery through strangers.

One: Surf's Up

Mauricio Yanez

May 6th, 2012 - 7:18 am

hello how are you?

well gonna be very cool to meet whit you and drink something...

i am free all this time soo just tell me ok

un saludo.

mauro

I'm in bed when I first open his message. The glow of my laptop's screen fills the

dark, empty cubby-of-an apartment where I am living for the next three months in Barcelona. That didn't take long, I think to myself. Why, didn't I just make that post on Couchsurfing.org two or three days ago? Looking back at my inbox I find even more responses. More vagabonds. More locals that want to show me the raw pulp of their city's skeleton stripped bare of the tourist frills and thrills. Mauro it is, I say. Yes, I can meet with Mauro, and then some of these other people too. Yes, that wasn't so hard.

The initiative to post my CouchSurfing invitation did not bubble out of my outgoing nature; I am more of a stream than a geyser. I have shy tendencies, a natural yearning for new human interaction but a lack of social skills to break the ice and meander into another pool of friends... No, the initiative came from a deeper ache, a feeling of free-floating uncertainty in a big, new city.

My first week is a mix of electricity and culture shock. On one hand, I am in love. I walk around like I might faint at every corner; my heartbeat is but a flutter of an eyelash. Everything seems yet too exotic, too buzzing, too alive -- and the foreign new relationship I have with the city has been rapidly blossoming and unfolding its velvet underside and all of the vibrant new petals I might pluck, as well as all of those other wiles and attractions it uses to draw in quivering tourists like myself. On the other hand, I am merely a Michigan gal. The biggest city I've lived in was when I made the two and a half hour trek west to settle in Kalamazoo. In Barcelona, I am a Petoskey stone in the Mediterranean Sea; in Barcelona, it's easy to feel small. And so far there have been two places where I've distinctly felt myself shrinking.

My first Saturday in the city, my new roommates and I decide to take on Barcelona like a true Catalan. Taking on Barcelona like a true Catalan means not leaving

the apartment until 1AM, dancing at the *discoteca* all night until your legs feel like the *crema catalana* that you ate after dinner, but then prying yourself from the tangled, pulsing mass of sweat and limbs, and dragging yourself to Barcenoleta beach in time to see the sunrise. Maybe it's because I am half-delirious from lack of sleep and overexertion, but in a time when I should feel most connected with Barcelona, sitting on the shore after having just crawled from the steam of the city's very gut, I watch the clear waves lap the tip of my toes -- then retreat back to the horizon. And I wonder how many other tourists in the world have reached this seaside and scoured this horizon? How many other loners and losers and lovers have sank into this beach to breathe between their pangs of wanderlust? And I feel silly; I have some deep-seated suspicion that I am but a mere particle of dust being tossed and flitted around with the heaving inhale and exhale of Barcelona's breath, of Barcelona's laugh. And I wonder is there not some way for me to feel grounded here? Is there not some way to lodge myself, grip onto the gums, and feel a part of the beast?

The second time I feel small is when we hike to the stone cross at the peak of the clay mound in Park Guell. The place is writhing with people; every five steps I take I hear a different language. And one can see how far the city sprawls, the splatter of Mediterranean color from buildings that look like graham cracker blocks, the childlike, fantasy creations of Gaudi, stretching from sea to mountain. And one can see how far all of these people have sprawled, wafty Parisian women, clusters of huddled Chinese families, lanky blonde Swedish blokes; it is globalization at its finest. Globalization has brought us in, has hardwired us, and pushed and pulled us to ramble on from our original countries, and landed us all here. Yet what good is it when we still felt foreigners to each

other, to this city? It was not a piece of our own, and we were not shares of each other.

Two of my roommates later tell me a story after they get home from the *supermercat*,

“An American guy talked to us,” they tell me. “But we were too jet lagged and stupid to do anything about it.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well we were grocery shopping, trying to figure out what kind of wine we should buy, and this guy just came up to us and said how nice it was to hear other English speakers.”

“Did you get his phone number?”

“You’d think we would have. But instead we just kind of stared at him, didn’t really say anything.”

Sometimes I feel like that when I’m people-watching from a bench off Las Ramblas. Watching the stacks of heads bobbing in a constant stream that zigzags down the street between jewelry stands and street performers, between *gelato* and *tapas* joints, a human snake, slowly inching down the sidewalk, shoulder-to-shoulder, yet somehow disconnected. Segments of a worm that have been ripped by the hook, thrown in the sea, yet still squirm. It was like that on the metro too. Hollow-eyed strangers with pursed slits for mouths that sat across from each other yet didn’t dare to look at each other’s faces. We came to know the rubber soles of each other’s shoes well.

Mauricio Yanez, general information:

Couch Available Yes

Couchsurf Requests replied to 100%

Last Login: 4 hrs ago

Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain...

Profile Views: 4,334

Age: 34

Education: Graphic Designer

Grew up in: Santiago de Chile

When one looks at Mauro's profile picture, they see a black and white photo of a man without a shirt, Beatles' mop-top black hair, brown skin, chain necklace. The arcing shadow of a mountain looms in the backdrop, but the man is crouched in some shrubs, eyes furrowed and focused, digital camera poised in front of a single, wiry flower.

Personal Description

While my story is this i was born in Chile i live there for 26 years, but i had always in my soul the idea to go and know the world.. soo i come to Barcelona and my mine was changer o lots, the world from my point of view began to change in the speed of light... we are living a revolution now the technologi is going very very fast and we are forgetting the contacte whit naturality... i think that we have to advantage the present...normaly we are in the future or in the past...we have to stay here is the present... this is where things happen...and absolut live with love, is the most important thing to start.

He has 19 positive references, 14 from surfers, and 13 friends. Pouring over his online profile, we have no relation, he is not a friend-of-a-friend. I know nothing about him besides these details. And we have nothing in common except that we are travelers, and we're both registered on this website, both in the midst of our blur of plans and duties and going-about of our daily lives, resting in the eye of the hurricane only long enough to invite someone else in to take a look at the peculiarity of these storms we've created.

Yet there's more than that. I don't agree to meet a 34-year-old stranger from Chile in the narrow, winding back-streets of Barcelona's Gothic Quarter just to dig up the tales that Mauro has to tell. I'm looking to plant my own.

I'm restless for something new, for my own Spanish adventure: authentic, strange, maybe even a bit reckless. Traveling alone in a new country, I feel myself regress to the angst of my teenage self, wanting to fling myself free of my mother culture's confines and at any new experience that Barcelona has to offer. This strange city! Laundry-strung alleys of pastel shirts and panties that flap in the wind more gloriously than the gold and red stripes of the Catalan flag! When I step forth from my apartment steps to meet up with Mauro, I can't help but find myself full of faith. I do not know what to expect, if I will like him, if he will like me. I do not know where we will go, or what we could possibly talk about, or where the night might lead. But I have faith that it's going to be something unusual, and in being unusual, something inspiring. And I have hope that it will be the end of solitude and the start of a story, not just for my thesis, but more importantly, for myself.

Two: Meeting Mauro

Mauro and I meet at midnight, at the metro stop Jaume I, yellow line, in the heart of Gotico, the city's old quarter where you tend to find more of the skateboard and harem pant sorts squatting on stoops, drinking beers and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes long past those tourists who have wandered and returned to dream their dreams of the next day's itinerary. When I first arrive I am fidgety. The area has long shadows and I don't quite know what I am doing, how this all works, or if I will even be able to recognize him from a mere profile picture (not to mention the fact that I'm not used to being surrounded by Spaniards; the bronzed complexion, dark hair, and cocoa-pitted eyes all meld together into one indistinguishable mass to me.) I stand near the metro stairs looking around and clinging to the corner of my flowered dress for a few minutes before I see a figure advancing, a bit awkwardly, himself.

"Mauricio?" I ask.

"Hallo, yes" he says smiling.

"Kathryn, nice to meet you" I reply with a sheepish smile and we kiss once on each cheek -- a Spanish custom. He's wearing a white scoop-neck, jeans, a couple necklaces and a metal, Celtic bracelet. There's a tote bag slung over one shoulder with a picture of Bob Dylan and the words "Like a Rolling Stones" printed on the front; I'm not sure if the extra "s" is a typo or not. A moto helmet is tucked under his left arm. He's taller than me, but still short for standards back home. In comparison to Spanish men, he is average height. His profile says 34, but in person I would have guessed mid-twenties. Maybe it's the lack of wrinkles and the vibe that he ought to be leaning casually against a surfboard when he talks.

“I don’t know if you have idea to go, but I know bar with friends...” He starts.

“No I don’t have any plans,” I say. Not only do I not have plans, but I also don’t know anything in the area. The bars are daunting to choose. We begin walking. Like most side streets off Las Ramblas at this hour, the families have scatted but left behind the more seedy sediments of youth for the night. Indian men toting six packs of Estrella cans are scattered around the corners lifting them at us. “Cerveza, beer...” they beckon.

“So uh you say you here 1 month?” he asks.

“No I’m in Barcelona for 3 months... for an internship. How long have you been here?”

“Well I come from Chile for 26 years. And I live in Barcelona for 7...”

“What made you move?”

“It’s long story...” he trails. “I always know in my soul to see the world. But I come for music.”

His English is intermediate with certain comprehensions that completely miss, and get lost outside, the doors of translation. I try asking him more but only come to the conclusion that, well, he just really loves rock and roll. The Doors, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones... he plays guitar and I tell him how I bought a ukulele just before I left for Spain, and my short-lived attempt to learn to play it.

“Ookalaylee?” He says with his thick Spanish accent and a wide grin.

“Yeah,” I say. “Like the little ones.” He laughs a bit so I guess it’s funny for him to imagine this strange, small American gringa with a pint-sized instrument to boot.

“So do you like Barcelona?” I ask him, mulling over my own fondness over the new, lively abode, with its lights and late-night fiestas whose music might swallow the

world if it weren't for the echoes of the mountains or crash of the sea to drone it out.

“Barcelona is... is very international. And it's very cool because I am here, and I meet you here and I am Chilean and you are of *estados unidos*. But I think it's also very hard,” Mauro says looking up a bit ahead of him, his eyebrows furrowed slightly. “People come but they leave. Six months, year, three months... I make friends and I love sometimes people. But then they leave.”

The complaint strikes me as I try and imagine what this must feel like, a constant exchange of youth, a new influx only to replace the last outflow. Barcelona -- the “lost boy” of Europe. Barcelona, whose city center is trapped in perpetual youth. Barcelona, where batches of souls, like bottles of wine, come to age and ferment before they are transported and sold elsewhere.

“Do you think you'll stay here then, or would you rather move?”

“I love London,” Mauro's voice gets enthusiastic. “London is my soul.”

“How come?”

“For the music,” he answers. “Lots of rock and roll.”

We arrive at the first bar that has a back stairway down to a small room with a band the size and feel of a student ghetto basement. There are too many people for us to pile in, but he pokes his head around and looks back at me.

“Flamenco,” he says and leans in. “I don't really like this music.” So we stand by the bar instead.

“What's your favorite Spanish beer?” I ask, partly out of curiosity but mostly because I don't know any Spanish beers to be able to order. He ponders this for a moment before telling me Estrella but more so Voll Damm.

“But Voll Damm is....” He stops and searches for the word. “Is heavy. You only want two, three drinks.”

“Okay I’ll try it,” I say. We grab our beers and stand off to the side.

“Salut!” He says as we clink glasses. “Is good?”

“Yeah, I like it,” I reassure. He smiles.

“My friends, I don’t see here. Tink they move to other bar,” he tells me then. “Do you want to...”

“Yeah sure, we can go.”

“But we have to...” he tucks his beer in his tote, and holds it as not-so inconspicuously as he can and smiles. I do the same and we scurry down the sidewalk. Honks and cheers spill out from the streets, and a few, stray fireworks spontaneously combust overhead like bouquets of flowers getting tossed and exploding in the sky. Spain has just won the football finals to move onto the 2012 European Championship, and I smile a bit to myself remembering the metro ride over when a group of Barca fans stood in the middle, belligerent and belting what I assumed to be victory songs amongst taut-jawed passengers.

“Everyone is so crazy about Football here,” I remark.

“Spain just won,” Mauro says. “But you must be careful... girls get stolen. Big nights you must be careful.” I nod and agree, yet can’t help but stack his own heeding against him. After all, I do not know this man at all. And I am having drinks with him in a foreign country, where I do not know any dialect of the native language at all.

We arrive on Valdonzella ten minutes later, and stop outside a place called Manchester. Inside is another crowded, dim-lit bar. Hanging paper lanterns glow red.

Another entrance veers right, wrapping around a medium-sized lounge of dark wooden stools and velvet red couches. Nobody looks older than thirty, and there are several men with buzz cuts and a single dreaded “rat tail” that strings down their back. I recognize the thick, oversized glasses attributed to hipsters, and there are a lot of jean jackets with jean shorts, tattoos, but surprisingly not piercings. At the back is a large board, almost like a shadow box, with light illuminating the outline of cassette tapes. Beneath it, we approach a gusty blonde and kind-faced brunette. They see Mauro, smile, and stand up to kiss cheeks.

We all sit around the high-top. I find out the two girls are from New Zealand, and they discover I’m from the United States. As Mauro wanders off to get us beers the brunette, Amelia, asks how I know him.

“Do you know of CouchSurfing?” I ask, as most acquaintances of mine in the States have never heard of the site before, yet alone fathom the concept of inviting a stranger over to sleep on your couch. College-aged youth seem to find it exciting but don’t care enough to follow through with it themselves. Parent-aged adults may find it fascinating, but ultimately don’t like the sounds of it, and quickly revert to horror stories about all of the sick people in the world, the latest news about some girl getting raped or kidnapped or being found with her throat slit in a ditch somewhere. “Ah of course,” she says. “So you’re staying at Mauro’s?”

“No just meeting up with him, I’m actually doing my thesis on it.”

“Your thesis? That’s cool,” she nods and gets quiet for a moment. “But what do you really do on that?”

There are 5.5 million CouchSurfers worldwide, just under the population of

Denmark, and more than the population of Ireland or New Zealand. 5.5 million wanderers searching for something beyond the towering steel of the Eiffel Tower, beyond the sand that slides through their fingers on the Barcenoleta beach shore. For a connection, something to tide them over without tying them down. 5.5 million hands reaching for the keyboard, 5.5 million faces caught in the reflection of their computer screens, scrolling through possible encounters, scouring for strangers that may take a seat of significance in their lives. 5.5 million snakes slithering into the private spheres of stranger's lives, slithering through the cracks of cultures, of space, of formality and trust and time.

Mauro returns with two more glasses of Estrella. Everything is poured in glasses here, whether you order a beer or a coca cola they pour it in a glass for you. I'm not exactly sure why but my personal haunch is that it's because Spanish culture is the antithesis of "to go" culture. You do not take food to go in Spain. You sit down. You eat it. You take your time eating it. You order a Sangria. You talk with your friend or your brother or your lover. You order dessert. You watch a frazzled American power walk down the street. You talk. You order a café. You talk until you have nothing to talk about. You sit in quiet. And even after all of that time, you still have to go ask for the bill because if you don't, the waiters will let you sit there all day without handing it to you, because nobody is in a hurry. Everybody has all of the time in the world to sit for three hours over a café after their meal. And even if they don't have all of the time in the world, then time, and the rest of the world, can wait for them. It's as simple as that.

I get to asking Mauro the usual questions. Right now he works at a movie theater, ripping ticket stubs. He's not too fond of it, not because he finds the job mediocre or

anything, but mostly because he likes to meet new people, and the only people that come into the theater are old. So when a young woman comes in he suddenly perks up “welcome, *welcome*,” he’ll say and do his best ushering-in. Unemployment is 25% here, so it’s a job nonetheless. The pay is good but “I tink it’s very.. boring,” he says expressionless. “Take the tickets and show people where go. But it’s huge theater,” he goes on. “Lots of people, thousand people. Whit a big, big... eemage. Is that how you say? Eemage?”

“Yes, image” I smile, noticing the different sound of the word when you stress the second, instead of the first, syllable. “So what would you rather do? What’s your dream job?”

“I like graphic design. I take courses before and now I go back to take again. I really like uh... freelance because you can go anywhere,” he says. “Just need laptop and lot and lot uh... energy and... creativity.” He stops for a second and takes out a bag of tobacco to tuck into a paper.

“But I have this for job,” he remarks abruptly. “I have many other work, many other passion. I make painting, and music.” He slides his tongue at the edge of the paper, seals it shut. “You want to go outside?”

“Sure,” I say. By now more of Mauro’s friends have arrived, including one of the New Zealand girl’s brothers, Mauro’s French flat mate, another guy from Chile, a couple from Madrid, a girl from Italy and her German friend that looks like she just hitched over from Woodstock with glasses and dirty-blond pine needle hair that touches the edge of her jeans. Half the group stands to join.

Outside the street lamps make the alleys seem gray and dingy compared to

daylight. Spray-painted graffiti garage doors are pulled over closed shops. We stand in a circle. Some of Mauro's friends ask me the same old questions: where I'm from, if I'm here on vacation, how long I'll be here. I ask about Barcelona.

"Barcelona could be better," Mauro says. "The music is not so good."

"Yeah," agrees Gabriel, Mauro's long, curly-haired flat-mate from France. "They only like Bruce Springsteen." I remember my surprise a week or so ago when Springsteen played a concert here.

"Born in the USA!" Mauro imitates the husky voice and lunges forward on one knee, throws a fist pump into the air. Everyone laughs.

"*Por favor,*" A bald, muscular man in a black t-shirt and pants pleads to us, urging a bit in Catalan, gesturing to the windows higher up. The group nods and throws out a "lo siento." Mauro turns to me.

"Since ban smoke inside, everyone must go outside to smoke. There is much noise pollution. People live in flats above bars and become very mad. You must be careful, they throw sometimes out windows eggs...urine... feces."

"Feces, really?" I ask.

"Yes yes, feces," he says.

Everyone shuffles back inside. One of my favorite Crystal Castles' songs is playing. I never thought I'd hear it in a Barcelona bar.

'Cause on the surface the city lights shine

They're calling at me, come and find your kind

Sometimes I wonder if the world's so small

That we can never get away from the sprawl

Living in the sprawl

Dead shopping malls rise like mountains beyond mountains

We pick up the beers we had left behind -- open -- on the tables. And for a moment I remember freshman year when a friend of mine had left for home early after feeling ill at a party. Later, she was found passed out face-first on her dorm room floor and taken to the hospital for Rohypnol. I can't help but hesitate, but no one here seems to have those concerns. I take a drink.

It's approaching 3 AM and the bar is beginning to close. I run to *el bano* and when I return Mauro tells me everyone is going to an after-party at Jaime's, the New Zealand brother's, flat in gothica. He invites me to come along too.

"Sure," I say. It's funny how you never really grow out of loneliness, never really grow out of the natural desire for acceptance. I'm a 20-year-old woman yet I feel like a lonely school girl. I feel like I've just been invited to hang out with the cool group a grade above, the ones that you always admire and long to be friends with from afar.

We shuffle down to Jaime's apartment like a buzzing chain gang, engulfed by our own chatters and giggles that reverberate off of the narrow walkways behind us. When we reach the fourth floor, the string of friends file in. Mauro and I are the last two; he sets his hand on my back, ushering me into the flat. For a moment I can picture Mauro at work, standing at the red-roped gateway of the cinema, ushering strangers into the dark theater seats to wait for their movie's stories to unfold.

To the left is a dark room with a queen sized mattress on the floor. Further ahead

is a long, tall hallway to the living area. Compared to the hobbit hole that I live in, this place is a palace. A gypsy palace. A few sparse pieces of furniture sit upon tapestry rugs next to a clothes line. White walls and high, wood-beamed ceiling loom overhead. Incense and ashes lay in little mounds around the room. My favorite part is the small, iron-railed terrace overlooking the gothic quarter. Amelia tells me how the other day, when they were feeling lazy, they tossed a rope down to a friend at the bottom for her to strap on their credit card and a baguette. Street-goers watched amusingly as the suspended baguette slowly inched up to the flat.

On the wooden table is a spread of glasses and beers and liquors. Mauro offers me a drink, but I shake my head. I have a warm flush in my cheeks and a light hum in my joints; I am slightly buzzed, but I don't know if it's from the beers or the spontaneity of finding yourself in a random apartment in the middle of Barcelona. I wander off to the terrace to look at the streets from a different perspective.

Gonzolos, Mauro's fellow Chilean friend, spots me and takes the opportunity to practice his English. "I'm trying to work on my English," he insists, "my Spenglish, correct me. I want you to correct me. It doesn't help if you don't tell me my mistakes." I try to tell him that his English is perfect but he grumbles otherwise. When Americans say they know a little Spanish, they actually don't. When Spaniards say they know a little English, they're actually fluent. I laugh at something Gonzolos tells me and he asks "how can I say I like your laugh? I love your laugh, it's *contagioso*?"

"Contagious?" I suggest.

"Yes, that's the one. Your laugh it's... *contagious*." Unlike Mauro, who sometimes touches my arm or back to steer me as he would his slightly lost, younger

sister, I suspect that Gonzolos is a bit of a pickup artist. Harmless, but merciless. I confirm my suspicion later when I'm swinging my arms back and forth, grazing my dress a bit as a nervous habit, and he leans in and says, "I like your dress. When you touch it like that it makes me... how do you say, heat? Hot? You're taking advantage of me."

They start to play some music from Jaime's laptop in the living room. It's an electronic band but I'm not sure who.

"Shapeshifter," Jaime's girlfriend tells me. "They're really popular in New Zealand. It's kind of like dubstep but not so synthetic you know. They actually make the sounds with real instruments, not all this machine shit."

"They're electronic without the electronic," Jaime adds.

The group morphs into a circle, bodies jabbing back and forth to the bass, girls putting their hips into it. I study their faces and there's something glowing about the scene. Kind of like the subtle awe you might feel when you stumble upon a clearing in the middle of a forest thicket. Or maybe when you look out your window and catch a Canary taking a mid-afternoon splash in the garden bird bath. You feel like you don't belong, like it's something too personal, too golden. But you're also too wide-eyed and brimming not to feel a part of it, not to feel like you belong to share in that secret, that scene.

It doesn't take long before Mauro reaches out his hand to beckon me from the couch.

"Come on Katrine!" He insists. I say no thanks. He puts out his hand again. I shake my head. He wiggles his fingers. I sit. He clasps my wrists and tugs. And, just like that, I am part of the circle. I am stiff-jointed, and a lousy dancer, but I am dancing

nonetheless. I am dancing with Catalans, with Chileans, with New Zealanders, with French, with Spaniards, with Germans... Some dance with their hips more, some more with their shoulders or feet. We sing to each other dramatically, reaching out our hands at each others' faces, closing our eyes for the high notes.

The music stops. Everyone groans.

"Did we kill the Mac?" Mauro asks as Jaime fumbles with charger cords. We are silent for a few moments, staring at the blank laptop screen.

"More Mac!" Someone else yells. The group adopts it as a mantra. "*Did we kill the Mac? More Mac! More Mac! More Mac!*"

The Mac is revived, and then we really get into it. The floor rattles with it -- our eyeballs shake with the stuff. Even the quiet couple that have been whispering love words in the corner find their hips swaying. Feet tapping. I may not know your language but we can dance to the same tune. We may not know the tune, but we can feel the same grooves. In the music, I feel the rumble of the airplane, the drum of my heart's beat as I watched my town dissolve into an ocean. I feel the pull of Mauro's passions as he quit his family, his country, and committed to a life of the unknown -- of music! It doesn't matter where the song was born, what language it's in, who sang it. The rhythm translates. You can feel each dancer's vibrations. And anyone can dance to it, anyone can dance. Anyone can find their beat.

Mauro taps me on the shoulder.

"I must leave soon," he says, "I have to work early in morning," apologizing for having to part the party this "early" at nearly 5AM.

"No problem," I tell him. "I'll just leave when you do too."

“Where you go?” He asks.

“Do you know Avinguda Parallel?” I say. “Between Poble Sec and Placa d’espanya?”

“Parallel?”

“Yeah.”

“Say it again,” he grins.

“Parallel,” I repeat. He laughs.

“You say it so English,” He teases and mocks my pronunciation and inability to roll the R’s. “My moto it’s still near metro Jaume. But I can give you ride if you want.”

“That’d be great,” I tell him. “Thank you.” We say our goodbyes to his friends, and after the appropriate amount of pleading and hassling for us to stay longer, we slip out the door and into the now-barren streets.

“Have you ever gotten in an accident?” I ask Mauro, recalling the wild way that moto riders here weave in and out of lanes and squeeze in the makeshift alleyways between cars haphazardly.

“No,” Mauro says. “No, never,” he asserts. “But it will be good now. No one is out. Here, this one,” he points to a red moto ahead that looks as if it had been stored in someone’s shed for the past decade, duct tape holding the seat together. He lifts it open to pull out an extra helmet from its base. I fumble with the strap, and then slide onto the moto behind him.

“You must hold on,” Mauro tells me, and I grip onto the sides of his jacket. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” I call, my eyes flickering bright.

The moped lurches forward, then draws back abruptly, making me clink my helmet to the back of Mauro's.

"Ow," I say. We rattle on. We bend around Barcelona's curves, and I'm on the edge of my seat watching the city coalesce into a blur of light. My teeth are clenched and I am not thinking of anything else I want to do or see while I am here, I am not thinking about my thesis or about my friends or family or boyfriend I've abandoned for the summer back home. I have Barcelona by the reins.

"Where is it?" Mauro yells back to me as we circle around the statue of Placa d'España, with the steeping hill of Montjuic on the right.

"Further down," I shout back. "You can just stop at Poble Sec."

We stop and I hop off and hand him my helmet.

"Thanks for the ride," I say. "It was really nice meeting you, I had a lot of fun with you and your friends."

"Yes yes it is nice to meet you too," he says. "Maybe we can meet again later and go to beach other day."

"Yeah that sounds good," I say. We kiss each cheek.

"Goodbye katrine!" He calls, and I wave as he rattles off.

I take the metal, three-person elevator up to the sixth floor and let myself into my apartment. Inside, everything is exactly how I left it. Ikea red couch and Ikea clear table with Ikea black, plastic chairs sleep in the dark alongside Molly, my Texan roommate, snoring in her room. On the table is Molly's little notepad with the vintage "girls just wanna have fun" cover, containing the list we'd brainstormed earlier of things we want to do and see and eat in Barcelona. I tiptoe along the wood tiles and collapse into my cot

bed, stretch out atop plain white sheets. At nearly 6 AM, my eyelids are tearing at the seams. But I stare at the ceiling for a while imagining and replaying the night in my head. *Maybe we can meet again later*, I think of what Mauro said before he left. And I smile; it almost feels as if I've made a real friend here or something.

Three: From Estrange to Inspire

In my experiences, the strangest part about meeting a stranger is how swiftly the strangeness of it all slips away. The strangest part about meeting a stranger is how suddenly that stranger emerges as a friend. While I make casual contact with scores of other CouchSurfers, Mauro is one who sticks. We start hanging out every week. We meet on the corner of Diagonal and Passeig de Gracia after I get out of work. We kiss cheeks and ask “que tal?” He hands me the helmet. I hop on the moped behind him, hold on. Parc Guell, Barcenoletta beach, numerous benches and bars in the alternative Gracia neighborhood where he lives, free concerts at Arc de Triomf, street rambles down Raval, his favorite “rock-and-roll street” off Las Ramblas, and the list goes on. But it doesn't matter where we go. By now it is mostly a pretense, an excuse to meet up, to talk. These are all places he's seen before, and to me, they are hollow without our conversations to fill the monuments with meaning. Sharing pistachios and talking about our weekend antics seems more holy than the towering spires of La Sagrada Familia. Each time I mount the back of his moped my veins pulse more loudly than they did on the peak of Montserrat.

In such a big city, in such a big world, the small things still strike me as most

profound. To others, they may seem simple. I do not know why I find them profound, but like the flash of a firefly in the face of a moment, I recognize them glowing and fluttering between my fingers.

With Mauro, these moments mostly arise out of quirks, remarks that catch me off guard. Like when he asks me if you can say “raining stars” in English and draws me a picture of what he means. I tell him no, we say shooting stars, but then I start thinking about the image, about the meaning of the words, in a way that I never have. I imagine seeing streams of light rocketing down and pattering off the top of umbrellas. I imagine falling in love -- like it’s “raining stars” in the streets. Raining stars, I like the feel of it. Another time we’re sitting on a bench in one of his neighborhood squares in Gracia, listening to street musicians, watching a father chase his runaway-two-year-old and capture her with kisses. Tables are filled with the beer of old men, and in the middle of the square, kids circle their bikes around a bell tower and Mauro tells me “I like this, this bell tower, when I see it I do not know the word in English but it’s like ah... I am home.” I’m also struck by his unusual love of flowers, and how he stops when we go to Parc Guell, not to take a picture of Guadi’s architecture, but to take a picture of a juggler through the focus of some flowers, his aviators balanced on the tip of his nose.

Or there’s the time when he tells me how he doesn’t like it when people put coats or ribbons on their dogs because “it’s not like the dog is going to turn around and say hey! Thanks man, I was cold! But I wonder what time the dog and human become friend?” He questions, suggesting that “maybe it start with a small one, when mother was off finding food, and then baby meets.” I do not know the answer to his question, but I start to wonder what time the human and human stopped becoming friends.

For whatever reason, it is the quirks and character I discover about CouchSurfers that comprise the mosaic of my most meaningful memories and give color and art to my time in Barcelona. Something about the humanness of it all, each person's unique set of experiences and idiosyncrasies, fears and loves, goals, tastes, habits, interests, styles, beliefs. And then our ability to find and form bonds where our own weird kicks overlap with someone else's weird kicks. Like snowflakes that melt together into a human blanket of the earth.

Take Nika for example, an intern from Czech Republic who I meet for a day at the beach. She has a nose and belly ring with rainbow-disc earrings that dangle from her ears. (She also tells me she used to have nipple piercings, as well as a cheek and eyebrow stud, all of which she did herself.) She is 25, but could pass as a teenager with her striped tank and cut off-shorts, bandaged elbow, and horizontal bangs. At first, I am certain that she doesn't like me. She is peculiarly blunt and bored, if not annoyed, by the efforts of conversation. She doesn't, however, have trouble complaining about past CouchSurfers when I ask.

"There was a guy from Italy and I imagine him *'italy,*' she says batting her eyelashes. "But when he arrives he is a nerd. And he is ugly, I mean *ugly.* And he has lots of baggage and asking me question if he should stay at an apartment with 8 people or with 4 people and I'm like come on man! 4 people of course. He also like to use very big words... I like when people are to the point. When I ask someone a question I want an answer. I think he just liked to hear himself talk," she remarks. She also tells me that she doesn't like Americans. "They're always asking how you feel. How do you feel about this, how do you feel about that... come on!" she says making a growling noise.

We lay on the beach, but she doesn't like to swim. She also doesn't like to tan too much because "it's not natural, it's not good for you." So I'm curious as to why she suggested we go to the beach. I find out that she does, however, like to long board. She tried to bring a mini long board on the plane but was rejected. She loves the rush, and she loves the adrenaline going down the steep hills on the side of Montjuic, but notes that "flat land is quite boring." It's the speed and the risk that keeps her interest. That's also why she travels so much; boredom follows and catches up with her when she stays still for too long. Next she'd like to go to Malaysia; I suggest that Thailand would be cool too, but she says no, not Thailand, that's where everybody goes.

"I have one friend that I want to go hitchhiking with, he's the only one that can deal with my moods," she tells me and it's the first time I see her smile. "And if I'm in a real bad mood he laughs and tells me, 'you cannot piss me off Nika...'" But for the most part, she travels alone, like she is in Barcelona, and that's why she uses CouchSurfing.

"My friends they always say yes, I'm going to come visit you! But I believe it when I see it. Or they say let us know when you find cheap plane tickets! But once I buy them they say oh I cannot go I have to work or I have no money. I also have many friends now that are mothers and getting married and having babies."

"That's crazy," I say. "I can't imagine having kids right now, I don't even know if I can imagine having kids ever." I assume that Nika will agree seeing as marriage and kids represent the epitome of the square life, the antithesis of adrenaline, as well as an existential threat to her fast-paced life of sporadic movement and change. But this is where she surprises me, where I catch her soft spot.

"I used to think that way too," she says. "But now I'm 25. When I hold my best

friend's baby, I can't help but want one too. My clock is already ticking." She sits up and clutches her small belly. "I don't have a boyfriend, and I don't know if I'd want to get married, but I don't think you need that to be a good mom. A baby mostly needs love. Maybe if I don't have anyone in a couple years I'll adopt. I guess I just want to make sure I have a good job first. But that's why I'm here doing this internship."

We start talking more about our futures, about where we imagine ourselves. I share with her my fear of uncertainty, of my upcoming diploma without an idea of where I want that diploma to take me, and my hope that my own internship here will help me find my bearings. She listens intently, and tells me about her own internship too, and how she's having a hard time meeting people, how her roommates never want to go out, and how she wants to go to a CouchSurfing group meetup, but is too intimidated to go alone.

"You've never been to a discoteca?" I ask, shocked, when she tells me.

"No, I haven't" she says. "My roommates never go."

"Well my roommates and I usually go once a weekend. You should come out with us."

"Yeah I will," she says. "And I don't even think I'd mind wearing the dresses like these girls do. Sometimes I think that it would be nice to sparkle."

We realize that we are both starting to burn, and decide we better leave. Once we reach the metro, Nika stops.

"So now what?" she asks. "What are you doing now?"

"I was just going to go back to my apartment and get something to eat," I say, caught a bit off-guard. She waits and looks at me expectantly. "Do you uh, want to

come over? I don't have anything fancy but I was thinking about picking up some watermelon or something."

"Yes," she says. And so we pick up some watermelon and tortilla from the store, and I make egg sandwiches for us at my apartment on un-toasted bread since the toaster broke last week, then we crack some cans of *clara* and talk about roommates and Nika's love of Argentinean men until she feels like leaving. I don't know how I did it, but apparently she liked me after all.

Then there is Damian, the blonde-haired Polish CouchSurfer from Switzerland who maintains his sanity from a soul-numbing job in accounting by taking a weekend trip to a new city every month. Damian accompanies Molly and me for our first visit to the castle at the top of Montjuic. There are cannons posted on the four bastions facing the sea.

"Do you think I'd get in trouble if I climbed one?" I ask, not because I am actually afraid of getting in trouble, but mostly because I'm trying to see if I will offend Damian or not. He looks at me, then at the cannon, and smiles.

"I don't know but I think you should try," he says. I look around then dart under the cannon's neck. I stretch on my tiptoes, but can't reach. I jump and claw frantically upward, but still can't reach.

"Damian give me a boost!" I call. Damian runs, picks me up like a piece of Styrofoam. I wrap my arms and legs around it like a child clung to its mother's leg. I latch on, strapped sideways. Damian and I are laughing. Molly is snapping a photo. Damian pushes. I heave. My vegetarian arms shake. I extend and push upright. I am up! I am up! A whistle shrieks. I leap. And we all run wildly to the other side of the

castle until we realize nobody is chasing us. Afterward, Damian buys us a victory round of Sangria to drink. We dangle our legs off the castle's side, and I've never had a drink taste so sweet.

For my twenty first birthday, Mauro throws me a barbeque party on his terrace, where you can look out and see the building tops like crooked top hats against the skyline. The back terrace is hung with a dozen strings of crystal and disco balls and wind chimes that catch the light when the sun is low enough. The windows are draped with blue and purple tapestries, and Mauro is shirtless with aviators in the kitchen, he and his girlfriend making "pisco sours," a Chilean drink, for me and his friends. Everyone has been asked to bring a loaf of bread, and the counters are overflowing with baguettes. Marcia, one of Mauro's Chilean friends, who speaks French with me since she doesn't know English and I don't know Spanish, slices up cheese to top on the bread and waddles around the party with the tray. After the sun goes down Mauro and Gabriel start up the grill. I have eggplant with goat cheese and potatoes, and Mauro hunts me down to make sure I try his *pico de gallo*. Eventually the food turns to crumbs and the wine bottles to drops, and Mauro and Gabriel start a jam session in their room, where everyone crams in to listen, sitting on the floor before them like kindergarteners waiting to be read their bedtime story. They end the night on a duet of "Paint it Black," passing off solos, their faces lighted and grinning.

These moments remain striking and clear in my blur of Barcelona memories, although to an outsider, they may not be much. A couple of strangers in intimate settings. A surprising remark. A friend. But it's a break in the routine. It's an instant injection into something so delicate and so intricate as a person's personal life. Their

group of friends. It's digging out your raw organs, those passions that keep you pumping, and putting them next to someone else's raw organs, to hold side-by-side in your palms. And in learning something about someone else, you start to learn something about yourself. When you only have one day, one night, to stay on someone's couch or meet up and try to become friends, there is no choice but to cut out the bullshit. You have to strip your life and yourself of all the unremarkable, all of the petty things you may get hung up on, and show them what really matters. You have to find out what really makes up your guts.

Four: The Global Wave

After my first month and a half in Barcelona, Elena, one of the program directors who helped me find my internship, asks to meet for a café to discuss how things are going. I reassure her that the internship is perfect for me, that no, I'm not homesick, unless she's asking if I feel sick when I think about going back home, then the answer would be yes. Yes, she will have to pry me with an iron spatula to hurl me onto the flight back home. She also asks if I've had a hard time meeting Spanish people.

"Well I don't speak Spanish," I tell her. "So I haven't met anyone as far as just meeting random people at a bar or in the street. But I do have a couple Spanish friends from this thing called Couchsurfing, have you heard of it?" Her eyes widen with a big smile, her tongue pushed forward under the little gap between her two front teeth.

"Couchsurfing!" She says. "Yes, yes I love Couchsurfing!"

"Have you done it before? Were you a host or have you surfed?"

“I’ve never hosted, but when I was in Erasmus and a student I took a trip to visit Paris. The guy I stay with was very nice! He showed me around the city, and we went to meet his friends and hang out. And you know, we still stay in touch so if you do plan on visiting Paris then let me know! I can give you his number.”

Discovering that Elena is also a CouchSurfer makes me feel more attached to her. Sort of like the feeling you would get if you were to move across the state only to discover that your neighbor happened to have graduated from the same high school as you. Or if you were to discover that your professor happened to love the same obscure band as you. The bond is instant. Once you discover someone is a fellow CouchSurfer, you feel a sense of “recognition,” like there’s some deep-seated secret shared between you - a mutual understanding, a camaraderie. Even if you don’t know the person, you feel like you are connected, like part of your stories, your histories, are essentially intertwined.

Being a member of CouchSurfing almost feels like you’re part of an “underground” scene. Like you’re part of a counter-culture, and these sentiments give the group a greater cohesion. When you discover that someone else is a CouchSurfer, that fact alone gives you confidence that they “must be” a good person to have heard about, and actually participated in, this “minority” community as well.

But the community is not that exclusive, nor as “underground” as one might think. It’s the top dog in hospitality-exchange sites, the leader that is only part of a greater trend. And while CouchSurfing may be the most popular, it is certainly not the only, nor the first, site of its kind to exist. The following offer similar variations:

1. www.HelpX.com, www.workaway.info, and www.volunteerstays.com are

work-exchange sites that connect users with hosts that will provide free food and accommodation in exchange for set hours of volunteer work. [Www.woof.com](http://www.woof.com) is the same concept, but is targeted exclusively towards organic farming and supporting sustainable lifestyles.

2. [Www.globalfreeloaders.com](http://www.globalfreeloaders.com), www.hospitalityclub.org, and www.bewelcome.org have an identical setup as CouchSurfing and allow hosts and travelers to exchange free accommodation for an interesting social experience.

3. On [Www.stay4free.com](http://www.stay4free.com) and www.knok.com, users are connected to make arrangements to swap homes for travel accommodation. So while the exchange lacks the social element of CouchSurfing, it is still centered on the concept of free accommodation, placing trust in strangers, and adopting a local's lifestyle.

4. [Www.triptrotting.com](http://www.triptrotting.com), on the other hand, lacks CouchSurfing's element of free accommodation, and focuses solely on bringing together travelers and locals through cultural activities.

5. [Www.warmshowers.com](http://www.warmshowers.com) has the same structure of the CouchSurfing exchange, but is targeted exclusively for touring cyclists.

In the end, each of these hospitality-exchange networks share a common mission of cross-cultural exchange and, as CouchSurfing.com puts it, the promise that encounters with strangers and foreign lifestyles will *create inspiring experiences*. In addition, they all emerged around the same time, in the 1990s or later, after the Internet had become available to the public. For this reason, they also can be traced to an organization that introduced the "couch surfing" concept before CouchSurfing existed, and before there even was an internet to be "surfed." Servas International, a non-governmental, non-profit

organization, offered the first hospitality-exchange network to introduce these ideas.

Following the aftermath of the global tragedies witnessed in World War II, Servas was a peace movement founded in 1949 by activist Bob Luitweiler to eradicate the underlying hatred and discrimination that culminated in the war, and to rebuild the values of multicultural tolerance and international understanding that culminate in peace. The setup is the same: members join as either hosts or travelers. Travelers stay in a host's home for a chance to form friendships, connect cross-culturally, and create inspiring experiences from the diversity of lifestyles, backgrounds, and perspectives that comprise the "human condition." In 1973, Servas was registered with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and has since developed into the website www.servas.org after the introduction of the internet.

While Servas created the original concept of "couch surfing," there are three major differences between Servas and the hospitality-exchange network that developed after the invention of the internet today. These include:

1. Servas requires a screening process in order to be accepted as a member, CouchSurfing does not.
2. Servas members connect initially through physical letters, CouchSurfing members connect initially through virtual messages.
3. Servas never garnered the rapid popularity like that of CouchSurfing.

With Servas, membership requires the application of a registration form that includes a passport-style photograph, two character references, and an annual membership fee. It also involves a personal interview. These requirements serve as safety precautions. Under the FAQ section of the United States Servas' website, the

question “how can I be sure if it is safe to stay with the hosts listed” is answered with the following:

“All Servas hosts have been personally screened and approved by an experienced representative of the national secretary of their country. Hosts must renew their membership annually and must keep their information updated in the interim. Each renewal is subject to there being no unresolved or unfavorable reports on file. Travelers are encouraged to report any serious problems they may have encountered on a Servas visit.”

Thus it is a formal third party that acts as gatekeeper for the community and provides the source of “trust” that members draw upon in order to feel secure enough to open their homes to strangers. Interviewers also filter members to make sure that they are the “right” kind of host or traveler that share the community’s general values and are “responsible and trustworthy, open-minded and flexible, and someone who enjoys meeting new people.”

While these application steps provide members with the necessary sense of trust and security for the project to succeed, they also act as barriers that prevent more rapid and widespread participation. Whereas Servas’ members dwindle at around 14,000 hosts, CouchSurfing boasts 5.5 million users and has gained approximately 2 million of those users in the last two years alone.

In contrast to Servas, CouchSurfing, and the other hospitality-exchange networks that emerged post-Internet, have eliminated these barriers and re-centered users’ sense of trust around cyberspace. While Servas members make initial contact through a physical letter, cyberspace provides a “virtual third place” where CouchSurfers may gather and

initially meet (Abrams, Maloney-Krichmar, and Preece, 5). The virtual environment creates a delicate balance of guarded transparency, allowing members the opportunity to gain familiarity through online, open discourse, yet still shielding them from the perceived hazards associated with physical space.

Cyberspace allows CouchSurfers to become their own community's gatekeepers. Virtual profiles act as "public bulletin boards" in which other members may rate their experiences, vouch for one another, or publish negative feedback. While there is an additional option to become a "verified member" for a small fee, the vouching system of reputation is the backbone that sustains members' sense of trust and security. CouchSurfing is thus able to be governed as a bottom-up, grassroots community, in which anyone has the opportunity to join because those who join are still subject to peer-to-peer surveillance, informal sanctions, and the potential of being ostracized to the point of membership becoming obsolete should they "misbehave."

While CouchSurfing's greater popularity can be attributed, in part, to the elimination of Servas' entrance barriers and dependence on cyberspace, it should also be considered that the two sites were born into very different historical contexts. Servas arose specifically as a counter-reaction to the preceding decade of World War II and thus was "established with the goal of eradicating war and the social conflicts leading to war." Fostering world peace is still maintained as the site's principle goal, but Servas was essentially created to organize and develop the anti-war, pacifist sentiments that were generated from the preceding decade of war. The decade preceding CouchSurfing's foundation in 2004, however, offered its own, historical influence on the site's culmination, growth, and direction.

Starting with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union that marked the end of the Cold War and beginning of the United States' superpower status, there was a significant shift in international priorities, focusing less on military, nuclear, and economic rivalry, and more on "postinternational" multilateralism and interdependency issues like human rights, the global climate, and free world trade (Osterhammel and Petersson, 2003).

According to hegemonic stability theorists, the shift from a bipolar international system to a hegemonic international system also provided a backdrop conducive to globalization, noting that a hegemonic power provided the security, markets, common currency, and loans "necessary to support a highly integrated world economy" (Nau, 280).

Participation in an integrated world economy, in turn, was accompanied by trends toward the elimination of trade barriers and increase in the flow of goods, ideas, and most importantly for CouchSurfing: people (Collier and Dollar, 11).

Around the same time, the dramatic increase in internet use in 1993 only contributed to this expansion and to personal internet accessibility (Rosenberg). However, it wasn't until 1997 that the first social network site was launched (Boyd and Ellison). While the introduction of the social network site was important for allowing strangers to connect online, it was most unique for "enabl[ing] users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (Boyd and Ellison). Originally used to organize a displayed network of "friends," this concept would transform into a basis for the "vouching" system of reputation that CouchSurfing now depends on, enabling users to articulate and make visible their social experiences publicly.

By January of 1999, the European Union adopted the Euro as a single monetary policy. Not only did a single currency make tourism easier between member countries by

reducing transaction costs, it also served as one of the most visible symbols of European integration to date. As such, the Euro's real significance was in creating an "imagined community" between European members by "helping people identify with each other and conceptualize themselves as nationals" (Kaelberer, 163). It decreased the importance of nation-states and national territorial boundaries, increased transnational identification, and consolidated individual cultures within a broader community.

Another milestone was the 2003 completion of the Human Genome Project coordinated by the U.S. Department of Energy and National Institutes on Health ("About the Human Genome Project"). The Human Genome Project focused on non-zero sum goals to determine the complete human DNA sequence and identify all human genes. With the international collaboration of 18 other countries, the completion of The Human Genome Project was a shared global interest: the improvement of molecular medicine and biological research in the treatment and detection of genetic predispositions and disease would benefit all of the world's citizens ("About the Human Genome Project").

While these events indicated a world moving toward peaceful integration, on the other hand, the 1990s also faced international threats, negative flows, and counteractions to a more intricately connected world. The steps made toward Israel-Palestinian conflict resolutions in the 1993 Oslo Accords were thwarted with the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The World Trade Center was bombed by Al-Qaeda terrorists in 1993. And in 1998, India and Pakistan overtly declared and practiced nuclear testing, just to name a few (Squassoni, 1).

Thus the opposing forces of globalization were complicated. As the world struggled toward international integration, it simultaneously suffered from globalization's

negative flows and counter reactions from anti-globalist movements. Increased liquidity, paired with a pressing need for international cooperation through trans-national tolerance and identification, created the backdrop to CouchSurfing's creation. And in an era of unprecedented globalization, CouchSurfing emerged as a hospitality-exchange network of unprecedented popularity.

Five: Multitudes of Mo Ya

[Mo Ya](#)

June 22, 2012

Hi Kathryn. I just read your profile and, wow, it really sounds great. Also you like The Doors and Edward Sharpe and the magnetic zeros, so that means you can't be a bad person.

If you wanna meet some day, beer, wine, (weed?) and talk along about travelling, life, the world, octopus, pineapples or whatever it would be nice. I'm a cinema student (Or I was, I just finished it one week ago) I'm living here for 5 years, I travel a lot cause I always wanna know new people and I think that's one of the best cities to do it, so I'm really happy to live here.

Also I could show you some places of the city (have you been in some jamm session here?) so... I don't know, if you feel like hung up let me know, and if you

wanna know something else about me just... ask.

The Barcelona CouchSurfing community is booming and my lack of “local” status does not deter my inbox from attracting 3-10 requests like Mo Ya’s daily. Even when my profile clearly indicates that I am a far, Aryan-American stretch from Spanish, there is a constant supply of Surfers, and true locals, interested in the added company despite my lack of cultural roots in the city. It’s too time-consuming to respond to, let alone meet up with, every CouchSurfer, so I end up sifting through the messages quickly, overlooking the short, one-line requests to meet, ignoring the suggestive, wink-face-filled requests to grab a drink, and every so often, stopping when one has a more unusual character.

Mo Ya’s profile picture is a black and white painting of himself with a yellow banana held like a gun to his head. In his other photographs, he has dark, Greaser-style hair with sideburns, a goatee, and two penny-sized hoops piercing his left ear. He is 23, with a self-proclaimed occupation that reads “writer, singer, filmmaker, astronaut, liar” and “the monarch butterfly sanctuary in Valle de Bravo, Mexico” listed as his one amazing thing to have seen or done. I add him on Facebook to figure out details.

June24 Mo Ya

well, lets see, about meeting some day...

I’m working in a hostel, night shift

That means 23h till 07h

And my days off are Wednesday and Thursday

So... I’m free most of the afternoons and these two evenings

June24 Kathryn Giroux I'm free everyday after 18h so would you want to meet Wednesday?

June24 Mo Ya Is fine at 22h?

June24 Kathryn Giroux Yeah sounds good.

June24 Mo Ya Where at?

June24 Kathryn Giroux I saw on your profile that you live near Placa Espanya too so how about we just meet at the corner of Avinguda Parallel and Placa Espanya, in front of the Fira building.

June24 Mo Ya Perfect
I have to go now
So see you then

Wednesday I sit on the steps near the rusty red pillars of Placa Espanya. By this point in my CouchSurfing journey, I've lost the greater part of the anxiety that once accompanied my first CouchSurfing encounters. Still, there is always a pipsqueak of uncertainty that echoes from the well of my gut, sending subtle, nervous shivers through

the rest of my skin. The nerves are not like those suffered before a public speech, but more so like those experienced anticipating the crest of a rollercoaster track.

His look is distinct, so it isn't difficult to spot him.

"Hola! Que tal?" He says as I stand to kiss cheeks. "Sorry I might be late. Have you been here long?"

"No not at all, just sat down," I say. Mo Ya is a tall, lean figure in a white t-shirt with a robot on the front, a stone necklace strapped by black cord, and light beige, fedora hat. His voice weaves with an upward sloping warmth and sense of familiarity.

"I was thinking we could get a beer or something," Mo Ya says. "One of my favorite bars is just down the street."

"Great," I say and we start walking. "So how long have you been CouchSurfing?"

"Just for this past year," Mo Ya answers. "Sometimes is less or more, but I live with three roommates. And we're all artists; I'm in film, there's another painter, and one writer, so I can't complain. But every two weeks or so we have CouchSurfer come stay in our home. Mostly when we get sick of seeing each other's face." He smiles. "But I see from your profile, you're doing some work on CouchSurfing too? Some project?"

I explain to him a little more about my thesis and vision for the final piece, a sort of gonzo-journalist exploration into the CouchSurfing community, the CouchSurfing impact, and what CouchSurfing means for individuals, as well as for our broader age of globalization. He listens and nods.

"The only problem I'm having right now is getting myself to actually write," I explain. "I really believe CouchSurfing has transformed my stay here, and it's kind of

daunting to try and capture that sense in words.”

“Writers and artists, we are in constant struggle,” Mo Ya says. “We always fight with ourselves. But you know I think the most important thing to do is just that. Just do something. Write *something*. Even if it’s shit. If you just sit and get scared about it then you go nowhere. You have to do. You can’t sit and wait.”

“Yeah but it’s easier said than done.”

“Yeah, I’m like that with painting a lot, I procrastinate, or I get distracted. But what we do for that, my roommate that is the writer you know, we will make a bet. Like every week we say, by this day, we have to have something for the other person to look at. And we get to choose what the other person has to do. So I’ll tell him, okay, this week you have to write a science-fiction story on... robots, I don’t know. And he’ll say okay, you have to make an oil painting of this or that. It’s not like it matters really, we don’t win anything, or maybe one will buy the other a beer, but when you have someone else you have to show it to, you make yourself pay attention to it more. You care more if someone else has to see it, you’re used to your own shit but that doesn’t mean you want other people to see it.”

“That’s a good idea,” I say as we turn the corner. Mo Ya curses.

“What?”

“Aw just that’s the place right there, but look at it, it’s full, it’s the football game. Fahk! How could I forget.”

“It’s no big deal we can go somewhere else.”

“Man, its usually not busy at all, just these fahking people to watch the football game on TV. But yeah I know another place we can go. I’m sorry.”

“It’s really no big deal,” I tell him.

“Ah yeah, at least now you know where it is, you can come back since you live down the street. Do you watch football?”

“I know it’s a big thing here,” I say. “But no. I don’t care about sports back home, and I still don’t care about them here.”

“Yeah me either,” Mo Ya shakes his head. “I could be doing other things. And there’s always the big guys that get drunk then fight if their team loses but it’s pointless. Who cares who wins? My dad used to take me to the football games, to try and get me to like it. But I never did.”

“Reminds me of my brother,” I say. “My dad was this big athlete in high school, broke all these records for track and softball and stuff. I think he wanted a son that he could share that with, but not my brother. My brother’s like a computer nerd and likes anime.” Mo Ya laughs.

“Yeah I think it happens a lot. Dads always want to use sports to bond or something. Here’s that other place, do you want to get a beer?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say.

We sit down in the metal chairs and tables on the sidewalk and order two glasses of Estrella. Sitting across from him, he sets his arms on the table edge and I notice his tattoos. A long feather extends down the underside of his left forearm. There are more feathers wrapping around his right arm from his shoulder. I ask to see the rest, and he shows me the crow on the back of his right shoulder from which the feathers trail. It was his first tattoo. And he tells me about his mistake of agreeing to get it all done at once. He hadn’t eaten beforehand, and afterward, his friends dragged him out to drink at a

concert.

“So tell me what’s your story,” he says taking a drink and leaning back in his chair.

“What do you mean, like what I’m going to school for?” I ask.

“Sure if you want, if that’s what your story is. But what makes you?”

It seems like an easy question, like something you should know by heart. How could you not know your own story? Shouldn’t these things be intrinsic, embedded in your identity, in your consciousness? My automatic, and as I’ve discovered to be, American response is to first think about my slew of jobs. Back home I’m a waitress at a 51 year old pizza joint, which is still not as old as the lady that owns the place, known as Juanita to strangers but Ciss to the wait staff and regulars. There I hustle the hard tile floors listening to the juke box that only accepts the old quarters, smiling at customers even when my smile is sagging under the force of habit rather than the ease of vital force. I’m also a receptionist, a liaison between students and the larger staff, the grease that keeps the gears of the office machine turning. And can’t forget the house cleaning, a job I tacked on the side for some extra cash to fund the sporadic occasion that I might not be too beaten-down to venture out into the night. I don’t house clean often, merely every other week, but it’s still too often to wash a kitchen floor three times on hands and knees -- once with soapy water, once with clean warm water, and finally with clean hot water -- and be tipped with the reject food scraps of the lady’s cupboards: a potato, the returnable bottles, or the pistachios whose shells are too closed to open.

Waitress, receptionist, house cleaner - they’re all jobs in the low socio status ranks of the division of labor, acknowledged as temporarily “acceptable” and fulfilling

because, as everyone tells me, *your first job is to be a student*. The promise of intellectual potential is the golden gong whose mantra guides me forward through the thick and suffocating dust of my other duties. The higher power of knowledge is my meditation that clears my mind of the chaos and torment of the menial motions along the way. Yet, even then, it depresses me to imagine that these aspects, work and school, are the only aspects that comprise “my story.” At the same time, I don’t know how to express, or how to feel about, my growing suspicion that this, sitting here with Mo Ya, this trip, this project, this four month journey contains more of “my story” than the last four years of my life.

“Well I’m going into International Studies,” I start. “And I’m also studying creative writing and French. I don’t know what I want to do yet, but all I know is that these are the subjects that I love to study, so if it’s something that I love to study, it has to work out for you in the end, right? Sure, I could go to school to be a doctor or engineer and make a lot of money. But I only want a job that I can find meaning in, that’s something I love to do. I don’t need a lot of money, and I don’t want a big house, I just don’t want to worry about bills, and at least be able to have the choice of saving up sometimes to travel. Do things like this.”

“Definitely,” Mo Ya agrees. “I feel the same way about cinema. I just graduated last week - last week! And my dad has already called me and asked what I was going to do next. I don’t know what the fahk I’m going to do next, and why should I? Why we have to get married and buy house and buy car? Who says this? I don’t want to do that.”

“Me neither,” I say. “And I feel like sometimes the most successful people are the ones that are like the park ranger or the kayak instructor or something that sounds

silly like that but they enjoy every day because that's what they love to do. You spend too much of your life at your job to not love what you do." We pause and take a drink of Estrella as I cynically contemplate my own contradictions. I don't have high demands for my future; the contagions of prestige and power and material prosperity do not distort my passion, I only care to do what I love. But the grand irony is that I have yet to pinpoint exactly what that is. I'm a chicken, sliced by the axe and fatal flaw of indecision, left to run in circles with my head cut off.

"But what about you? Tell me your story?"

"I love traveling," he says. "And I love it because I love meeting people. Because people is culture. So when I go somewhere myself for the first time the first thing I do is drop my bags off at the hostel and sit down at a bar. And I'm telling you, anywhere you are, if you just go and sit down at a bar, something will happen. Whether it's a bartender or waitress or somebody that sits down and "hey," "hey how's it going, where you from?" And that's how it starts. But other than that, it's cinema." He pauses to flick an ant off the table. "You know, people, we are systems. We need conflict. We search for conflict, solve, look for the next one... we need it. That's why we like film. And for me, like I don't know how to explain, film it's like someone that you meet and the more you meet them, the better it gets each time. Is new and interesting and you learn a little more about them, and you get something from them... but you also feel like you're giving something back. I want to give back to cinema because I feel cinema has given so much to me."

When Mo Ya speaks like this, he leans forward so that his head hovers the table, his eyes widen and his hands wave wildly in front of him the more and more he gets into

it. I'm surprised by how fast we're getting into it. His tone is like that of a man declaring his vows, shaped by an earnest tenderness, presenting his words as gifts to hang onto, syllables like vials of holy water scooped from the springs of Pamukkale. Our eyes lock in the way that they do when people sense something moving, something unearthing from deep below all the loose dirt out there, all the loose dirt that lacks root or life or worms to burrow further and penetrate into its layers.

"I have this idea," Mo Ya tells me after a pause. "For a documentary, you want to hear it?"

"Yeah I do, tell me."

"It's in a way like your CouchSurfing writing. Getting frames of faces, just people. But it's a documentary of the old and the young. Close-ups of young and old people around the world. And maybe start with the young people, and say what they want to do, what they think of their futures, or maybe what they are doing now, how they are living their lives now, what they fear most, what they want most. And then have the old people with same question. Because when you talk to an old person, like if you really sit down and let them talk and make them feel like you're listening, they always tell you what they regret. They always have a message they want you to do or not do. And it's usually something that you wouldn't think of -- but it's important! We always ignore old people, but they're about done, they've lived, they've had their chance. And that's what's so generous about it. They're saying look!" Mo Ya's voice heightens. "Look! I am too old. I am dying. But here, take this knowledge. Take it from me and run. I am too old and dying, but you can save yourself! You can change it for yourself!" He sinks back down in his seat and shrugs. "It would be easy. You only need a camera, then sit

people down and keep at from one angle in front of them. But it would be interesting, compare what each old person says from all over. If there is pattern.”

“I would watch it,” I tell him.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s something we’re all afraid of, getting everything in we want to do before we die. Or making a wrong decision. It matters, it’s relevant.”

Mo Ya and I finish our beers, and he suggests we leave to buy some more from a vendor to sit at the port and talk, after all there’s “no use in paying three euros for a can of Estrella you can get for one.” He asks if I’d mind stopping to grab some food along the way; I say I don’t. It’s a pizza place, two euros for a slice the size of two hands, and we pick up our Estrellas here to drink while we walk as well.

“Do you want some?” He offers.

“No thanks,” I reply. Then glancing at the pepperoni, “I’m vegetarian.”

He nods mid-bite, holding the Styrofoam plate close under his chin.

“I can ask why?”

“Yeah of course,” I say. “Basically I’m against the negative environmental impacts -- deforestation for grazing lands, inefficient use of resources since it takes more water and food to raise a cow then, let’s say, a wheat plant, and stuff like that. But I’m mostly against the large-scale factory farms.”

“Yeah I see,” Mo Ya says. “I have to tell you something though.”

“What’s that?”

“If I go to New York, or I mean, *when* I go to New York, I’m going to get one of those huge burgers. Those kinds the size of your head that you can’t bite, maybe will

choke you or something. And I'm going to take a picture and send it to you." I laugh and slug him good-heartedly on the shoulder.

"Is that what you guys think of Americans? Hamburgers?"

"Yeah. We kind of think of you with cheeseburger one hand, gun in the other. Maybe wearing a cowboy hat."

"Oh God."

"You don't wear cowboy hats?"

"We do, but that's mostly just in Texas or if you're in the country."

"What about guns? Do you own a gun?"

"Do I look like I own a gun?"

"Hmm maybe. At home you're probably some criminal." I laugh.

"I don't, and that's mostly just in Texas too. Most people don't have guns unless they're hunters."

"But what about the bank?"

"What bank?"

"The one that give you a gun or something if you go to their bank."

"Yeah I think I heard about that. Still not normal."

"You're no fun."

"So guns and hamburgers and cowboy hats, huh?"

"And big."

"Big?"

"Big cars, big buildings, big burgers."

"Big people," I add. He laughs.

“Yes that too.”

We walk through the neighborhood of Raval, the old Red Light District that has since improved in safety but still retains its edge and most committed, cult following of junkies and prostitutes. Despite its greasy, outer sheen it is my favorite neighborhood shared with Gracia. At night, drum circles form of Barcelona’s bohemians, clouds of Marijuana smoke hovering like anti-halos above their heads.

We reach the port with the statue of two mermaids, their wan, armless bodies adding to their strangeness. We sit facing the boats sleeping at the docks, the sidewalks tinted the off-gold or off-yellow hue of streetlamps.

We talk a little more about our backgrounds. Mo Ya talks about his home in Valencia, and their community problems with drug addiction. And I tell him more about the United States recession.

“Do people there feel that the United States is going downhill?” He asks.

“To an extent, yes,” I reply, thinking. “But I think we mostly feel helpless. Even if we could organize ourselves and protest something it feels like we’re too small to really mobilize anything.”

“The United States is huge.”

“And I feel like there’s a lot of things that need to change in our system.”

“Like what?”

“Like the education system; how we think standardized testing is the best way to learn, and that it’s the only measure of intelligence. And how teachers are less important than corporate CEOs and professional athletes.”

“What do you think you should do then?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Nobody knows. But I feel like we need a whole new shift in paradigm of thought. Like our own, new version of the Enlightenment or something.”

“In Europe, it’s interesting because we are all, like, watching. To see what will happen,” Mo Ya says. “Do you know the president of Spain?” He asks.

“No,” I say.

“See if you ask anyone here if they know the president of the United States, they will all know it’s Barack Obama. Why the fuck do I know that Barack Obama is the president of the United States? Why the fuck should I know that?” We laugh.

“I didn’t realize how much American music you guys play here too,” I say.

“Yeah, that’s how I learned English. I taught myself through TV and movies and music.”

“Your English is so good though, you didn’t take any lessons in school or anything?” I ask.

“No, nothing.”

“That’s amazing,” I tell him. “In the United States, like, that doesn’t exist. If someone just taught themselves to be fluent in another language they’d think you’re a genius or something.”

“Yeah but we have a lot of English media here. You guys don’t so much. Like I think 70% of the movies and music are English, so when I was a kid I’d want to see certain movies or watch certain channels, so I had to learn English. Or if there was a song I really liked I wanted to know what they say,” he says and looks at his watch.

“Hey but there’s this Jazz bar that is going to start playing soon. We should go. I don’t know you so much before but now I think that you would like it.”

“Yeah why not,” I say.

The complex of restaurants and bars is just around the corner from the port. From the outside, the place, called Bel-Luna, looks like any other bar. But once you enter, it’s simply a staircase that spirals down to the “real bar” underground, a speakeasy-style setting with brick walls, dim lighting, and a small stage with some seating. Mo Ya and I pick up some beers from the bar, and huddle to the side of a tall, round-top table. A saxophone, trumpet, piano, guitar, drum, and bass player blast on stage.

“This is great!” I shout in Mo Ya’s ear. “They’re really good.”

“They’re not actually a band,” Mo Ya shouts back. “They’re imprompt. None of these guys know each other. Anyone who has an instrument, or anyone who wants to sing, can play. You just sign up on a list and they take the next group of people.”

“How do they know what to do then?” I ask.

“When a new group starts you’ll see they all get together for a second, and the singer says what beat and key they’re going to play. If you listen, you can hear the repetitions. That’s what jazz was built on, imprompt, so strangers could jump in and still get together to play.” Mo Ya pauses, his hand in a stop sign in the air, waiting for the chorus. He points to the guitar player, and singles out his part, singing the notes to me.

Then he points to the bass player and does the same.

“You see?”

“Yeah.”

“And then they pass off solos,” he says as the trumpet breaks out.

“Do you come here a lot?” I ask.

“Yeah I have a buddy that plays the sax, like if you hear him play you’ll probably

fall in love. It happens to us all. Nobody wants to play after him. But we sign up together every Wednesday.”

“Really? What do you do?”

“I sing,” Mo Ya says. “Sometimes I’m too shy to sing in front of people, but it doesn’t bother me here.”

“Can I come back next week to hear you?”

“Yeah of course.” The group switches to a piano solo, a woman in her sixties in a long, purple tent dress and gray hair that frazzles at the ends. The crowd hollers her on. Mo Ya claps his hands a few times.

“I like this lady,” he says. “She comes in every week too. She’s homeless.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really. She’s homeless but she just loves to play the piano. Everyone knows her here. The piano is like her passion I guess. So they let her play.”

The lady’s hands sprawl the keys freely, setting notes where they feel right in our ears, hanging them above our heads, then dropping them to our toes. Mo Ya hangs his head down, nodding it to the rhythm. Hypnic jerks. It’s like Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” it’s like a Bukowski reading. And we are all part of it, the other players, and the crowd, and the booze egging her on, plucking the single, golden thread of sanity stuck as floss between her teeth. She never does look up, never acknowledges the room or the stage or the music. She drives herself into the hollows of the piano basswood. The piano basswood drives her deeper within herself.

On the streets, like the other Barcelona bums, she is not acknowledged. Bodies lay like sacks of dirt waiting to be returned to the Earth. I was guilty of stepping over

them, of ignoring the gypsies I passed by each morning on my way to work, sitting with their chins to their chests and their cups lurched forward toward the tourists, busy bumbling and buzzing into the glass windows of Dolce and Gabbana.

But here, in this burrow, in this Jazz watering hole, we see her. We stare at her directly. The piano acknowledges her presence and our bodies prove her impact; we dance for her. When she moves, we move. And suddenly the strings that connect us are clear. Only this time, she is the puppet master.

After the playing stops, the woman simply stands and leaves, not bothering to take a bow or raise an arm as some other players feel inclined. Like a Surfer's brief couch occupation, she fills the space, then leaves it free again without a trace besides the imprints she's left in the cushions and the impression she's left in our minds. Mo Ya and I decide to step outside too.

We sit against a pillar on the ground, a few other droopy-eyed stragglers scattered in hushed circles along the sidewalk too. Mo Ya rolls a cigarette, lights it up.

“What's your best childhood memory?” He asks me. I think for a few minutes, remembering the fall when my brother and I would scuba dive through leaf piles or playing flash light tag with the neighbor kids. I end up telling him about camping with my family for the fourth of July back before my parents were divorced, riding bikes and rolling down green grass hills. He tells me his favorite memory, at his aunt's house, the one who always made the best dinner, when he chased his sister around the table, running in circles through her giddy squeals. Mo Ya crushes his can on the sidewalk, and we sit in silence for a couple minutes. I take a look at my phone. It's six in the morning.

“Oh man,” I say. “I didn't realize it's so late.”

“Time to head back?”

“Time to go to bed,” I say. We heave ourselves up from the ground and turn toward the street. Mo Ya sets his crushed can on the ground, kicks it. The mangled corpse somersaults, scraping the cement ahead. We walk until we catch up. This time, I punt it, and it thrashes around the same, but with a slightly different sound. We walk until we catch up and Mo Ya punts it again. We take turns kicking the can the whole walk down Parallel. We take turns asking each other questions. What’s the meanest most illegal thing you’ve done? What would you tell yourself if you could go back in time? Seeing how the other will approach it. If they will tap it lightly with the tip of their toe, or if they will slide swipe it. If they will trip over their feet, or if they will pop it up high and playful the air. After I finish my can, I crush it and set it down too. The two criss-cross paths and ping off the pavement simultaneously. They tumble over each other. They run into each other, and stop at the middle. And when it’s time for us to separate ways, we kick the cans as hard as we can, taking a running start. We put all of our muscles and fibers, all of our momentum and fire into it.

Five: Bad Company vs. the Common Culture

In one of our weekly meetings, I ask Mauro if he has ever had a bad experience with CouchSurfing. With 10 new requests a day, and a new Surfer in his home every other week, I would assume that the probability of him finding a screwball in the mix is inevitable, if not just by sheer numbers alone.

“A bad CouchSurfer?” He looks at me with the scrunched eyebrows that tell me

he doesn't quite understand my question's phrasing.

"Yeah, like somebody you didn't like, or maybe somebody who stole something or who was disrespectful. A bad experience." I explain.

"No, no not really," he says. "But some people you make some connection, and some there is nothing. I don't think it's so bad though... This is normal, it's life."

It isn't until some five or six CouchSurfers later that I really understand what he means by this. The first "dud" that I experience is Michael, who grew up in Germany and now lives in Madrid. I invite him to tag along my daytrip to visit the Horta Labyrinth Park, a surrealist maze of shrubbery and green hedge gardens you enter with full intention of becoming lost.

The man is interesting enough -- commuting to Barcelona every other weekend with an extensive history in traveling and hostelling. He is kind and polite, well-dressed, a non-drinker and non-smoker, multilingual, has some Turkish background and a passion for meeting other people. While he agrees to meet up with CouchSurfers, he has never surfed himself, and prefers to stay in hostels. The most important criteria for Michael to stay in a hostel is whether or not it has a community kitchen.

"You don't think about it, but I'd say the kitchen is the most social place of a hostel. You can't help but talk if you're cooking something in the same room as someone."

But other than this bit of insight, I find myself disengaged and bored with one who many might find to be a far-from-boring man. And while I certainly do not dislike Michael, I also do not feel any particular remorse for when we part ways. Furthermore, when he contacts me the following week to see what I am doing for the weekend, I ignore

the request. Sure I feel bad about it, but not bad enough to divulge my plans, and certainly not bad enough to spend the time to meet up with him again, which I believe will inevitably drown my day in apathy and leave it in a shapeless, spineless puddle mucking around at the bottom of my summer's memories.

And it isn't just Michael. For my last night in Barcelona, I actually do *need* to find a place to stay between when I will be getting booted out of my apartment and when my flight will leave for Paris the following day. From six different host invites, I choose Lluís, who has been working as an official tour guide for Catalonia and whose interests include “playing the piano, riding horses, playing football and also watching (Barça forever), playing billiards, cinema, going out on party, videogames, geography, folklore, and of course traveling.” He requests that we meet up for a quick drink the night before he hosts me to get to know each other; I agree.

Lluís never runs out of facts. In the thirty minutes we talk, I learn that *horchata*, a milky drink we order, actually originated in Valencia, that it wasn't until a few years ago that Barcelona banned bull-fighting considering it to be animal cruelty, and that there has been a recent surge in Russian tourists the past 10 years, mostly due to more open governmental politics. He speaks more languages than I remember, and he speaks with the sort of fast-paced charisma of a man that's running for a seat in government. He sports a polo with its collar neatly folded. He sports jeans that cling to his calves, and his hair slicked back like a turtle's shell. I sit in my cut-off shorts that I've had since high school and my one-size-too-big tie dyed V-Neck that I'd picked up from The Really Really Free Market at my university. When he stops to take a breath I merely probe him with more questions, not daring to offer my own input to the conversation, my thoughts

suddenly seeming inferior and immature before they were even fully formulated in my head. He is 28, confident, well-spoken, and presentably well-informed of the world. I am 20, inexperienced, unrefined, and a bubbling, messy concoction of impassioned drive counteracted by childlike distraction.

But feeling intimidated is nothing too discerning for me. The intimidation factor is not the problem I have with Lluís. The problem starts when he shifts the probe towards me, with very specific points. My feelings of inadequacy and intimidation must be more obvious than I thought, because he compliments me on my sense of “humility,” a characteristic he finds rare in Americans. Rather, he concludes that the majority of us are haughty and unfoundedly arrogant in our patriotism. He then asks what I am doing here. I tell him I’m doing an internship. He inquires if I’ve learned much Spanish.

“To be honest, I haven’t,” I admit. “I didn’t know any before I came, and our target audience is English-speaking.”

“They don’t speak Spanish in your office?”

“Spanish is their first language, but they speak English as the base. My co-workers are from all over, so English is the language that everyone can understand.”

“Yeah but you had to have learned something.”

“I have a little bit,” I hesitate. “But only the very basics, like ordering stuff at restaurants and lefts and rights and asking where something is. And other random phrases,” I say. Lluís’s mouth is flat as he takes a drink of horchata. He seems very serious now to me, his features very hard, almost mocking. It makes me squeamish and I don’t know why.

“Like what,” he says. “Say something to me in Spanish.”

“Um,” I pause thinking of what I’ve learned in my two-week Spanish crash course. “*Me llamo Kathryn, soy escritora para Gomio y vivo aqui para tres meses, soy d’estados unidos. No hablo espanol pero hablo ingles y frances.*” I smile. He doesn’t appear amused.

“It’s easy to learn a language when you live there. Three months is plenty of time for you to learn Spanish, you’re just lazy,” he states flatly. “That’s the problem with Americans. Why do you even travel if you don’t know the language?” I blush. I know that I should have put forth a greater effort in learning Spanish. I know that I should know more than the few measly fragments than I do. It’s not that I disagree with Lluís. I think that Lluís shot his bullet square in my forehead.

But somewhere in the middle of Lluís’ proceeding rant, I garner a sense that this is not what CouchSurfing is supposed to be about -- belittling someone for certain skills that they lack or perceived flaws in their character, making them feel unwelcome or impermissible to travel because they don’t share a certain language, nationality, or religion. Maybe CouchSurfing serves different purposes for different people, but from what I had observed, they all unite at the basic principles of open-mindedness and curiosity. Hosts have a piece of themselves that they want to share, and a gap in their routines that they seek to open for the spontaneous and the strange. Surfers hope for more than a surface to sleep on, they hope for a local’s lifestyle that they can sink into, and a new character to add character to their own stories.

But above all, the ideal for both hosts and surfers is an authentic connection. One of those sudden, almost spiritual occasions where strangers surrender their social walls for a night and find a certain clarity in the vulnerability of another’s soul. A flash of

meaning, a sense of unification in one synapse of the rapidly multiplying human network. Electric, fulfilling, stimulating.

For in all of the 12+ CouchSurfers that I meet and speak with over the course of the summer, the question of a “bad” CouchSurfing experience is never defined in the way that the media would have us imagine. Roger, whose profile surges with 86 friends, 80 references, and admits to have lost track of how many CouchSurfers he’s hosted (though he does know it’s well over 100) has yet to have had anything stolen, let alone a criminal or violent encounter. Sara from Italy and Nika from Czech Republic, both prominent female participants of the community, merely shrug at the suggestion, never having faced situations of sexual assault, harassment, or other threatening experiences while CouchSurfing and hosting solo.

But rather, the most common complaint of a “bad” experience is someone that “doesn’t understand CouchSurfing.” It is someone that, like I had sensed from Lluís, is somehow deviating from the core concept of what CouchSurfing is “supposed to be” and the unspoken, but acknowledged, rules that govern it.

As Mauro explained it, “it’s couch surfing not *oh, je, ene* [NGO.] It’s not charity.” Roger was also adamant on this notion recalling:

“Sometimes there are people that email months ahead of time, and I don’t hear from them since, but then they call that night expecting that I can host them,” he remarked. “I don’t know where I’m going to be next week, let alone for surfers that ask if I can host two, three months before. I don’t like it when there are people that treat it like a hotel than a home. One time I had three girls over, and they were nice and went out and make party -- fine, fine, fine. But then they come back and one friend got sick in

my toilet, and just leaves it there. They don't think that this is my *home*. I live here you know?"

It's not a hotel. It's not a hostel. These are the two most common complaints I hear when asking. That's what defines a "good" from a "bad" surfer. Hosts expect you to treat their place like a home. And when you live with someone in your own home, whether it be a roommate or a parent, a sister, a wife, or a boyfriend, you don't just ignore the other inhabitants. You ask about their day. You make dinner together. You have movie nights. You play cards or poker. You make plans together, you offer a beer.

These sentiments, that CouchSurfing signifies more than just an offer of accommodation for free-loaders, aren't limited to Surfers. Hosts express being ruled by similar, unofficial guidelines as well. Mauro restricted the number of Surfers he hosted because "it takes a lot of time. I have to make conversation in my home. I have to make breakfast." Obviously not listed as requirements on the site, these "rules" still rein legitimacy in the minds of CouchSurfing members. And when I ask if he ever gets tired of it and feels like kicking someone out of his house that he doesn't like, he shakes his head and says, "I do not ask someone to leave, but what matters is if you have the energy. So if there is no connection then why put forth the energy?"

Mo Ya, who grew up in Valencia and also averages two surfers per month, remarks, "if I have people over I don't want to just give them the keys. I mean, that's fine too and I do [give them the keys,] but I want to be there to hang out. If I'm going somewhere they come, if I go make party with friends, I bring them; *you share everything*. It's like having a pet," he jokes. "Why have a pet if you're not going to be home? Why have a guest if you're not going to be home?"

For some members, CouchSurfing takes on a role beyond a mere hobby, and taps into their sense of identity, dominating their social priorities and responsibilities.

“Some people are crazy,” Sara told me. “It’s all they do. One time I had no place to stay in Paris, and one of the guys that does those weekly CouchSurfing meetings emailed me last minute to find me a place. I didn’t think much of it, but later I went to a meeting and was talking to people and when I told them who I was staying with they were like oh my god! You’re staying with Ryan? *The* Ryan? And I said yes, so what. I guess he was like famous in the CouchSurfing community. Everyone knew him because that’s all he did. And I got what they meant later cause after I stayed with him longer I realized that’s all he talked about. He was always like, I can introduce you to this and that person, and there’s a CouchSurfing event going on here or there. It was nice that he cared, but I think that that was too much. I think that these people are kind of crazy for it.”

Nonetheless, 100% of the CouchSurfers that I talked to asserted that the number of positive connections significantly outweighed the number of complaints.

“Some you like or connect with more or less, but I feel like everyone I’ve met has been cool,” Mo Ya told me. “Though I think if you’re someone who signs up to go CouchSurfing, you already have to be a certain kind of person in the first place, you know?”

I did know. The more CouchSurfers I met, the more similarities I found between them, and the more I became aware of a common “CouchSurfing culture.” The word “culture,” in this context, can not be used in the normal sense. Since CouchSurfing is a trans-national community, it lacks the common religion, language, ethnicity, and customs

typically used to define a nation's culture. Thus the CouchSurfing culture has to be much broader, as it acts as the umbrella that converges various individual's cultures beneath its single awning.

All one has to do is browse through a few online profiles and it will be easy to spot the stereotypes. The most obvious trait is the nomadic spirit; CouchSurfers all have a passion for traveling and highly regard international experiences. The second is a shared belief that diversity enhances the quality of human life. The third and fourth are the basic values of tolerance and a sense of altruistic compassion as guiding moral principles.

“Current Mission: Meeting special people, knowing new places, learning different ways to communicate...”

-Mission statement from Juliana Sovierzoski, Brazil

CouchSurfers are aesthetes. Many are members of their local alternative scenes comprising of artists, journalists, poets, musicians, photographers, filmmakers, actors, dancers, bohemians, and other creative lots. But more generally, they have an overall attraction to off-beat lifestyles and eccentric people, and a natural aversion to conformity. They are also adventure-seekers.

“I'm an arty kid who is back on the traveling bandwagon after a long hiatus involving art making for educational credits and pulling espresso shots for rent. The former has shown me that art exists in all things, whether we recognize it or

not, and the latter has turned me into an unwilling coffee snob. I like to find meaning in random coincidences, and enjoy big storms and the smell of the rain...”

- Personal description from Kieronymus Bosch, Australia

Some other common characteristics that define CouchSurfing culture include: open-mindedness, romanticized idealism, appreciation for nature and meeting new people, and carpe diem philosophies.

“I like to think that the only thing we have for sure is now. And I don't want to make the mistake of feeling that life passes by while we are waiting other things. At the same time, I consider that everything is relative, that every person is unique, and that everybody is free to understand the world at their own way, because there's no such a thing as an objective true.”

-Philosophy of Julia Motger, Spain

Thus the question arises of how much cultural exchange actually takes place? How much diversity actually exists? For one of the incentives of members' first interaction taking place in the void of cyberspace is that it offers a sort of “choose your own adventure” tool. In comparison to the spontaneity of encounters with strangers in physical space, CouchSurfers may sift through potential hosts' and surfers' profiles to control who they will or will not meet, and thus take an active role in melding their own experiences. This also leads to “impression management,” in which each actor can create a self-

presentation or hyper-self that emphasizes their own character traits, whether real or imagined, that will mirror what sort of Surfer, Host, or experience they would like to attract (Pearson, 119). Nika once explained to me how she would not accept a request from someone who did not have a profile picture posted.

“You can read a profile, but you also need a picture to feel for someone. You can tell by someone’s looks if this person is dull, or maybe if he is very straight or maybe if he makes party too much,” she said. “I have to see you to know if this is going to work.”

Thus it is rare that users choose someone that is entirely different from them. Instead, one is most likely to choose a member that has similar interests or aligns with what ideal experience they envision for their own travels. And while these aspects do eliminate some diversity that members experience within the community, they do not “reject difference, but rather ‘filter’ it in order to allow the community to internalize the ‘right’ kind of difference while excluding the ‘wrong’ kind of difference” (Molz and Gibson, 75).

By filtering out the “wrong” kind of differences, CouchSurfers are better able to make cross-cultural connections based on shared interests. As Mo Ya remarked, “for me this is the point of CouchSurfing, you search for people that are similar to you, that have similar likes and interests so then they can show you something beyond this tourist crap. And then you know that they will show you places that are good for your personality too, and see things you can both enjoy and share.”

In the consciousness of the CouchSurfer, identifying similarities cross-culturally also makes the world seem “smaller,” and “more connected.” Mauro conveyed this perceptual shift when he described his move from Chile to Spain. “It was hard in the

beginning, it was lonely.” He indicated that there were “good times and bad times” at first, but that he eventually came to realize that “it was all the same. You get apartment, you get job, you make party with friends, same as Chile but just here.” It was through cross-cultural similarities that Mauro was able to transcend geo-specific identification.

And furthermore:

the development of global social ties and a transnational identity requires the emergence of a cosmopolitan worldview. As such, it involves an awareness of global connectivity as having significance for one’s personal well-being; placing a value on personal mobility and foreign travel; and being open to cultural influences and appreciating cultural differences. (Sun, 3)

Although a recognizable “CouchSurfing culture” based on common values and social norms does exist, it would be naïve to assume that the CouchSurfing community is solely comprised of hugs and “kum bay ya” circles of trust, or that the CouchSurfing community is without its own deviant members. As I was leaving France, I received a warning message from the directors of the site, attached with a photograph of a scam artist that had leaked into the French community and was committing petty thefts from a string of homes in which she had been hosted. In 2009, a 34-year-old host was sentenced to 10 years in prison for rape charges by a 29-year-old woman surfing his place from Hong Kong (German).

While I was never in a situation of immediate threat or danger, toward the tail-end of my trip, when I was feeling most invincible and religiously sold to the CouchSurfing community, I was caught off guard by a man who hosted me in Paris. Looking back at our interactions, there were signs that I should have picked up on before accepting the

invitation. But after considering his 19 positive references, as well as my own positive experiences CouchSurfing, I disregarded his casual compliments as a mere friendliness, rather than flirtation, that must just be misconstrued cross-culturally.

Miguel was from Panama, he had moved to Paris the past year for a scholarship to work on his MS in engineering. From the start of our online conversations, he was adamant on hosting an “American girl,” as he encountered many American tourists in Panama and claimed to adore American people and culture. This sentiment, cushioned by the fact that he lived within a 5-minute walking distance from the Eiffel tower, won me over to accept Miguel’s invitation over other potential hosts. After having grown accustomed to the predominant negative stereotype of American tourists, I thought Miguel would be a comforting change.

Miguel insists on meeting me at the train station. He says he doesn’t want me to have to carry my luggage myself, plus I might get lost. I assure him I’ve lugged the forty-plus pound bag myself around Barcelona, but I don’t protest too much. By this point of my trip, I hate that red suitcase. I would rather light fire to its contents and be naked in public then haul it down the six flights of stairs of my apartment building or through the stuffy, underground coils of metro tunnels one more time.

Miguel’s flat is about 15 square meters. Immediately on the left is a door frame that opens to a sink and shower, though the room lacks a curtain or door. I decide I won’t be taking showers. The toilet is missing, and it will take me an entire day before I garner the courage to ask where it is (in the meantime, when he leaves me alone to run to the store, I will frantically search the place, pulling open cabinet doors that I hope might be a hidden toilet room, checking under the sink for a foreign toilet contraption). When I

finally do ask, I will discover that there truly is no toilet. The flats have a communal toilet facility located across the hall. There is a small table with two chairs on the right wall, a built-in kitchenette on the back wall, and a futon on the left. The futon folds out to a bed that takes up the remaining space of the flat. There is no other bedroom, no other couch, and no other floor space.

I'm not initially alarmed about sharing a bed with a stranger. Paris flats are expensive; they're small, I understand. I'm also thankful to have a place to stay, as well as someone to take me under their wing while I am traveling here alone. I ask Miguel how long he's been CouchSurfing, and he tells me that he just started back up after taking a year's break.

“Why'd you stop?” I ask.

“Because I had a girlfriend, and she was very jealous. She didn't like me CouchSurfing if they were girls.”

“Ah, I see,” I say.

“But now we are broken up, so I am CouchSurfing again. And I am a very liberal person, I think of CouchSurfing as normal life you know. If you meet someone and more happens, then I'm not against that. I know there are some rules or whatever on the site and some people are against it, but for me it's the same as meeting someone on the street or in the bar. If you want it to go further then that's fine,” he says looking at me. “Is Michigan usually a liberal state?”

“I think we usually vote liberal,” I say.

“Are you liberal?”

“I tend to agree with Democrats, but it depends on what issue it concerns,” I say,

uncomfortable and unsure with what he is insinuating.

“Good,” he says. “Latinos are liberal and our culture I think is more American than French. This place is so quiet, I can’t stand it sometimes. If you go to a Latin-American country there are always people on the street. We dance. Here the guys don’t approach the girls because they think that they are too handsome or something. But Latinos, we are not so handsome but we go after the girls anyway. And we usually get them because we are more persistent. That’s how Marc Anthony got Jennifer Lopez. He seduced her with his Latino way.”

And later that night Miguel tries out his own “Latino way” on me. We go to a CouchSurfing meeting at an outdoor bar on the Seine. While we wait in line for the restrooms he tries to kiss me. I turn my head and block my face.

“So you’re a conservative girl,” he says and lets go.

“Yes,” I say. “And I’m not interested.” But that still doesn’t stop him from trying to kiss me again after we go to bed. I push him away and tell him once more that I’m not interested in CouchSurfing in that way. He grumbles and rolls back to his side. While he doesn’t try again for the last two days of my stay, by that point, it didn’t matter. The shift in his demeanor and dwindling effort to make conversation with me made it apparent that he had only been interested in CouchSurfing as a dating site, as an easy way to lure women to his apartment and to pressure them into sexual, rather than social, encounters. Sure he may have stopped after the second rejection, but it was still an exploitation of my vulnerability as a solo female traveler, and an abuse of the CouchSurfing community trust.

To be fair, the issue of romantic encounters through CouchSurfing can be a gray

area. Just because CouchSurfing states that it is forbidden to use the community as a dating site does not mean that members abide by these rules. My next night in Paris, Miguel and I meet up with Couch Surfer Paloma, a Mexican body talk practitioner and feng shui consultant. It only takes an hour and a half into our meet before she voluntarily offers me detailed accounts of her own romantic escapades through CouchSurfing, including a foursome with her friend, a host, and his girlfriend, as well as several other one night stands with hosts she requested solely out of attraction. Whether or not this is a deviation to the CouchSurfing norms, or perhaps a common taboo that members just don't readily admit, CouchSurfing is used, for some, as a dating service as well.

But despite this negative experience, my mishap with Miguel still does not deter me from CouchSurfing or diminish my faith in its benefits and beliefs. While I would ramble Paris alone during the day, at night, Miguel and I would still go to large meet-ups of about twenty or more CouchSurfers. For our last night, the Paris CouchSurfing community holds a weekly Monday-night meeting at the bar "Lion's Pub." When we walk in, the TV screen projects "WELCOME CS MONDAY MEETING." Paloma happens to be there with a CouchSurfing friend from Pakistan. The girl introduces me to Gyula, a man with a five o'clock shadow and plaid button-down who towers above their circle at around 6'4". Paloma pulls me aside to point out a guy,

"That one, right there."

"The guy in the blue?"

"With the hat, yes. He is the one who I can't help myself. But we'll see tonight!"

She winks, then heads toward the bar, leaving Gyula and I alone. I look at the man leaning against the wooden stair railway before me, almond wide-set eyes and a beer in

his hand. He certainly isn't French.

"Where did you say you were from?"

"Hungary," he says. "I'm from Budapest."

"The only city I actually know in Hungary," I smile. "I heard Budapest was awesome though, I'd like to visit some day. What are you doing in Paris?"

"I'm doing an internship."

"Right on, what's it for?"

"Photography."

"Chose the right place for it," I say. "How long have you been here?"

"Well it's for three months," he explains. "But I leave next week. When are you leaving?"

"Actually my flight is tomorrow morning."

"Oh wow."

"Yeah, but I did an internship too, three months in Barcelona. And I've been in France for the past month, I just came to Paris these past three days CouchSurfing. I figured if I flew into Paris, and flew home from Paris, I couldn't leave without seeing more than the inside of a train in Paris." Gyula laughs and nods.

"So you came here all by yourself?" He asks.

"No my host is around here somewhere."

"No like to France and to Barcelona. You traveled here alone? And where else were you in France?"

"Well I technically came here by myself. I'm from the US. So yeah I didn't know anybody when I first came. But it wasn't really by myself. In Barcelona there were other

interns and I had roommates. Then in France I was in Normandy, in a tiny village called Ticheville. Like you would walk five minutes and Ticheville would be over. Maybe two minutes. But I did this thing called Workaway, it's like CouchSurfing just you work for your host for 25 or 30 hours a week in exchange for a free place to stay and free food. My site had 9 other Workawayers doing the same thing too. We had our own house just for the Workawayers. Then most of us would work 7-11, and every night our hosts would bring over bottles of wine afterward and we'd all play games like pictionary or cards or have bonfires and watch the stars. It was more like being with your family than being alone."

He asks me more about my stay, and I tell him how we had two days off per week. Two people had the same day off at a time, and we would use these days to go hitchhiking to other cities. There was a box full of cardboard signs the Workawayers made from cereal boxes, big marker letters with the name of the cities we'd hitch to: VIMOUTIERS, LISEUX, CAEN, ROUEN, OMAHA PLAGE, BAYEUX, DEAUVILLE, TROUVILLE, HONFLEUR, all of them followed with a S.V.P. at the end. I told him about the time when the Slovakian Workawayer, Adam, and I had the unlikely opportunity to get picked up by a semi-truck. The driver was a fifty-something year old Russian man wearing a wife beater and silver necklace. Adam didn't speak French, so I sat up front and listened to his story. He moved to Deauville with his wife and daughter when he was forty. I missed the exact reasoning, but the gun shot noises he made told me that it was due to safety concerns. I told Gyula how the man passed out rounds of cigarettes, and how we weren't really smokers, but we smoked them anyway because it had felt like something we ought to do in that moment. And I tell him how the

man picked us up with the intention of dropping us off in Vimoutiers, six kilometers from Ticheville, but ended up driving us seventy kilometers straight to our destination in Honfleur.

“Everyone says that French people are so snobby and cold,” I remark. “And I don’t know about Paris, but all of the French people I met hitchhiking were so nice. They really went out of their way to take us to where we were going.”

“That’s really crazy,” Gyula says.

“You’ve never hitchhiked?”

“No, no, no.”

“Have you traveled much?”

“Yes,” he replies. “But I’m a photographer for National Geographic in Hungary, and for the UN so I’ve had a lot of opportunity.”

“No way, really?” I ask.

“Yeah, so I’ve traveled most places in Europe. A lot of Eastern Europe, Slovakia, Bulgaria... Russia... Also Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Libya, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine.”

“Have you always wanted to be a photographer then?”

“Yeah, I have,” he says with a shy smile. “Since I was a little kid I’m always taking pictures, thinking normal things look cool. But now I like taking photographs of people most. Like Hungarian villages and Turkish bath house parties. I like to try and get their story in the picture, their history.”

Gyula and I talk one-on-one for the rest of night. And by the time we have to leave, I’m enamored. This man has made it, he has broken into a field that few have the

talent or the perseverance to access. He has thrown himself into areas of social conflict, has stood by rebel armies armed only with his camera, waiting for the right shot to show the world a story through another lens, bring out the human aspect of inhumane scenes.

Yet here he was, at a CouchSurfing meet in Paris, humble, quiet, kind.

“You’re a really brave girl I think,” Gyula tells me.

“What for?” I ask.

“Traveling alone like that.”

“Not anything different from you,” I say. “But thanks.”

I only had the chance to meet with Gyula for one night. We spoke for less than three hours. But I got to know more about him than I know about 95% of my classmates by the end of a year. The next morning, I check my inbox and discover that Gyula had found and added me on the CouchSurfing website. He left a message:

I'm very happy to meet you!

You are amazing, just keep going on your way!

Of course I don't know too much about you, but I realised that you are clever and talented girl. So I wish you many new and good expedencies.

All the best Gyula

I click on his picture to scan through his own profile, a step that I wasn't able to take since we had met spontaneously at the CouchSurfing meeting. Apparently, a man that I had mistaken for being in his late twenties was actually 38. But the almost-doubled

age difference doesn't detract from my memory of our encounter, it rather deepens it with the realization that I would not have talked to Gyula if I had been aware of his age, making the false assumption that a man 17 years my elder would lack the common grounds upon which we might forge a connection. If I had known his age, I would have assumed the sole possibility for connection would be a mentor-student, rather than a peer-to-peer, relationship. Though I did admittedly end up falling into the former, not due to his age, but merely because he mentioned his association with National Geographic and the UN. As a young intern, still fawn-like in my attempts to stand and walk into the world, I had been star-struck by his success in an alternative career route of passion over power.

Curious if he was lying about his career or not, I decide to enter Gyula's name into Google's search engine. I select the first link, bringing up his gallery site with titles that include "Turkish Bath Party, Gaza Conflict, Driveners Vietnam, Holy River India, Whale Hunters Indonesia, Boxing Club East End, Hungarian Villagers," and "Fight, Fear, Hope, and Faith in Pakistan." Gyula's profile indicates that he is "interested in changes of social role of places, and people behind this process... a picture – realized through human fate and stories." And one could see this interest translated through his photos, some captioned with political, cultural, or sociological insight into the subjects portrayed, such as "man is waiting for job. Lyari, the oldest part of Karachi, a kind of no man's land where smugglers, junkies, terrorists, and general bad guys roam freely."

I come across the picture that I find most fascinating in the "Driveners, Vietnam" folder. The photograph was taken in Hoian, bearing the title "A Lamp Maker Girl." In the center is a young Vietnamese girl with long hair falling to her bicep and straight

bangs. She looks to be around 10 years old, preoccupied with the lamp she's working on. Her market stand fills the rest of the frame, paper lamps of every color - red, orange, yellow, purple, blue - hanging like hot air balloons above her.

Gyula had thought that I was brave because I came here by myself. He had thought that I was brave because I was here alone; but I didn't feel alone. I had met CouchSurfers in Barcelona that considered me as a close friend. I had been taken to CouchSurfers' secret spots, places that they grew up around, that had grown into their most ancient and venerated memories. I had a collection of CouchSurfers' passions, of those core things that they clung to in this world, whether it be something as simple as a monthly trip to a new city, as complex as motherhood, or as inspiring as a photograph. I was here alone, but I didn't need to feel alone.

Six: A Glimpse Underground

June25 Mo Ya

uooo the workaway page is amazing!!

You don't have any idea how happy did you make me

Fucking awesome!!

Thanks thanks thanks

And I had a good time last night

I like you

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Back at ya! I had a lot of fun

Thanks for showing me a new place

Bel-luna has good vibes

June25 Mo Ya

Yeeeeeah is really great

Hey so there's this place where we go rock climbing

La Foixarda. Its like a tunnel with climbing wall

It's free, you just have to have equipment

Soo let me know if you want to go some time

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Coolbeans that would be great, let me know when you're going next, I'd be down to come

June25 Mo Ya

Coolbeans?

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Haha yeah it just means cool. I don't really know where it started or why it's beans.

June25 Mo Ya

jajaja

Have you heard this

Valiente by vetusta morla?

June25 Kathryn Giroux

No, let me check it out.

It's good

June25 Mo Ya

Ok, I have another one

That is, just amazing

Ok... but this one is special...

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Okay bring it

June25 Mo Ya

The lighthouse by Interpol

You have to listen to it before you sleep

That means, lying, lights off

And as loud as you can, or using headphones or something

June25 Kathryn Giroux

okay will do

June25 Mo Ya

No cheating

Promise?

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Haha okay promise.

Do you like phantogram at all?

June25 Mo Ya

Phantogram?

June25 Kathryn Giroux

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28tZ-S1LFok>

June25 Mo Ya

Hum... is great

You know the yeah yeah yeahs, right?

And metric

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Yeah yeah yeah

And yep

Starfucker?

June25 Mo Ya

Yep, the grates?

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Nope

June25 Mo Ya

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7C52UlwiNI>

I love this song and this video

but I think I should show you spanish and catalan music

I feel I have duty of doing it

Next time though, I have to go now

What is your mobile number? I let you know when we

go next to la foixarda

June25 Kathryn Giroux

Okay just one second

June25 Mo Ya

do it right now or die

June25 Kathryn Giroux Hold on hold on I'm trying to find my phone haha

June25 Mo Ya ok don't die yet

June25 Kathryn Giroux +4477037070

June25 Mo Ya Great so see you

June25 Kathryn Giroux Coolbeans

June25 Mo Ya Coolpeas

I've been hiking to the top of Montjuic before work every morning for the past two weeks, but I have never seen La Foixarda. It's on the right side of the mountain, past an Equestrian school that I have never seen before either. La Foixarda is free because there are no instructors. There are no supervisors, no rentals. It's a tunnel with surrounding cliff walls that have climbing handles drilled into them. If you have your own climbing equipment, you can come and climb at your own risk; there aren't any tourists here, just local climbers. The stones are colorful with graffiti, and the tunnel is scattered with shirtless Spanish men, some suspended from its ceiling, upside-down. Two men at one end of the tunnel blast System of a Down.

Mo Ya has a bag of extra equipment that his Australian friend and I can use. He teaches us how to tie the safety knots on our harness and how to belay for one another.

“Great! Now if you look by your left foot there’s a blue one, try to lift yourself there and grab the yellow one above your head. Keep your body close to the wall and use it to help.” He yells to the Australian girl and turns to me. “You have to make sure you talk to them the whole time,” he says. “So that they don’t feel alone.”

After we’ve all had a few turns, Mo Ya takes off the clips on his rappel down, and we switch to a wall that’s a little more difficult.

“This time you scout,” he tells me with a smile.

Being the “scout” means that you’re the first person to climb a new wall, so you have to clip the rope along the way that makes sure you don’t actually fall should you slip. While you don’t risk falling to the ground after your first few clips, you also won’t simply suspend in the place where you’ve slipped. It will be a bit of a drop.

When I start to ascend the wall, I am shaking. My foot can barely reach the first climbing handle; my knee has to be hoisted up by my chin so that I’m unable to lever my weight and must jump to grab some more handles above my head. The first few times I miss and launch backward to the ground where I started. The third time I make it.

“There you go, you got it,” Mo Ya calls. I make it to the first clip. I’m safe. I keep going, marking my path with the safety net of clips securing my trail. Climbing a cliff of Montjuic as a scout feels nothing like climbing one of the walls at the gym back home. It feels more authentic, like it’s all on you, like you’re really on your own. We climb until sunset, until I’m sweating and my muscles are giving, and we have all touched the top.

Barcelona is filled with “top ten places to visit,” but La Foixarda has never been one of them. And certainly places like Parc Guel, La Sagrada Familia, La Pedrera, Las

Ramblas, the Picasso Museum, the castle on Montjuic, Tibidabau, La Boqueria, the Olympic stadium, and Barcenoletta Beach are all important parts of Barcelona to see, but the grand irony of site-seeing is that one risks missing out on the city. One risks mistaking the stage production, all of the lights and props and shows built to entertain tourists, for what actually goes on after the curtain has closed. If you want to see a city wigless, rambling off the script with rollers in its hair and a cigarette balanced between its lips, find a CouchSurfer that can take you behind-the-scenes.

Roger Osan Lacasa has been vouched for

Couch available:	Maybe
CouchSurf requests replied to	60%
Last login:	3 days ago
	Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain
Member since:	March 2nd, 2007
Profile views:	13,485
Age:	31
Gender:	Male
Occupation:	multimedia engineer and computer science
Education:	quite good
Grew up in:	barcelona
Ethnicity:	catalufu

Teach, Learn, Share

hey there! i won't answer short messages, stranger you! do you wanna enter in our private life? let's give me some reasons !

July1 Roger Rol Lac: so... what are your favourite places to go to Barcelona by night? Or you prefer light? Hiih

July1 Kathryn Giroux: well during the day ive really loved parc guell, montjuic, parc grec, and of course la playa
and i guess i dont really have a favorite night spot, ive been to a couple bars and discotecas - city hall, opium, moog (or maybe it was moor?) blues cafe and manchester
any suggestions though?

July1 Roger Rol Lac i love a night club called "le bako"
is kind of private club, like secret
at l'hospitalet
it's only o friday
i think im going there next Friday

July1 Kathryn Giroux cool why do you like that one?

July1 Roger Rol Lac kind of freedom there! and music is very good!

Is not that kind of super crowded club
anyway, if you are in just tell me and i add you on guests
list, i think it's free for girls!

July1 Kathryn Giroux sounds nice, when did you say it was again?
Next friday? and i live with a couple girls, would there be
anyway they could come too?

July1 Roger Rol Lac sure!!! Just tell me their names before OK?
and i guess other couchsurfers are joinin
yes, next Friday

July1 Kathryn Giroux okay cool, just put down me and my roommate Molly
then for sure, I'll tell you if there are any more later

July1 Roger Rol Lac hiihhih ok ok! Well see you then! next Friday you come
explain me your life!

When Roger asks me if I want to go to a “secret club,” it sounds like the sort of thing my
mother would warn me about when talking to strangers. It also sounds like the sort of
thing my curiosity can't simply ignore. After I agree, I try to search the club and see how
“secret“ it really is.

Cada viernes noche. Lugar secreto. Barcelona

Every Friday night. Secret location. Barcelona

There are no pictures, no locations, no reviews. A few DJ's reference the venue, so it must exist - but merely as a whisper, a wadded note slipped amongst a select Spanish scene. In an age in which virtually everything can be found and shared online, I am intrigued how "le bako" has managed to stay off the map.

I come across the club's website. The homepage is black other than a count down with the Spanish translation for "coming soon" written above. There is no location listed. There are no line-ups. They only offer this description:

Worshipping the Roman god Bacchus, the god of festivals and wine, our party is born "I Bako". We embrace the old traditions to make these sessions unique and unrepeatable. Quality music, good atmosphere and rhythm crescendo that does not allow the rest are the standard of these sessions. Never forgetting our touch transgressor "Bako" that makes the difference and never ceases to amaze, performances, bodypaint, gadgets ... and anything you can imagine. Totally familiar character, these sessions are taking weight in the area of Barcelona thanks to all your support. Be very attentive to the next and be partakers of it. Become "Le Bako."

I show Molly. She squints at the screen then looks at me wide-eyed. "Are we joining a cult or something?" I try again to uncover exactly what we're getting ourselves into.

July 5 Roger Rol Lac

i didnt wanto to tell you before....cause is a surprise!

hihihhi

i'll tell you while going there!

hehehehe

if u want , we can dinner all together, then have a drink at

my terrace, and then go to the club together too

i live close to FC Barcelona stadium

maybe another couchsurffers at comming, i dont know, but

at least one friend of me (girl but not girlfriends is joining)

His Cheshire Cat responses only make the club seem that much more surreal. I ask him if we need to dress up, if this is a dress and suit ordeal.

July 5 Roger Rol Lac

you can go like you feel more comfortable

is not a fashion/snob club

Is more underground

You'll see... theyre people of different kind

And just tell you that a great do is coming Friday

Nuria ghia

Nuria Ghia. I search the name. A skinny DJ appears, her hair pulled back in a pony tail, chunky caramel highlights through her bangs, bambi eyes. I switch to the videos tab and find her performing at Sonar, an International music festival held in Barcelona each year. Crowds' heads nod like fishing bobbers to a hypnotic, minimal beat. Le Bako, Barcelona's best-kept secret. I do not know what I will find inside, and I can only imagine what bizarre kinds of people must crawl to that side of the street, but I am

intrigued. I am determined to find the location that floats above the map and to discover the place that has somehow escaped the electromagnetic spectrum's reach.

It's 11 PM and Roger's apartment building has no lights. Molly and I feel our way up the stairs to his door. I knock.

"Hello! Nice to meet you, come in come in," Roger answers. He's about 5'10" with matted black hair and tarnished, nub teeth. Compared to the building's cracked, gloomy exterior, I'm surprised by how cozy it is in Roger's flat. There's a wooden bookshelf besides a wooden table set upon a mandala tapestry rug. In the back corner is his computer where he works, self-employed, and to the left of it stands a small side table for a record player. He has us sit down on the futon, and leaves to get drinks. It's very quiet. He returns with three gin and tonics. I've never tried a gin and tonic before; I taste one and tell him it's very good. We talk a bit about the normal topics: jobs, schools, hobbies, etc. then move up to the roof terrace after his friends arrive.

One of his friends is from Madrid, and the other is Catalan. The two are known for their rivalry; a portion of the Catalan population seeks independence from Spain, mostly because they don't want their tax money to pass through Madrid. The two friends fall into bouts of passionate, but good-humored, banter, and I ask more about the political sentiments of the Catalan here in Barcelona.

"I'm Catalan, but I don't want to become independent," Roger says. "I do wave a Catalan flag... but waving a Spanish flag is different. It's almost like supporting fascism. At the same time it's not like I hate Madrid, and why should I? I like Jordi here, and he is from Madrid. It's the politicians that are trying to put us against one another. It would be the same as if I didn't want to meet you because I believed all Americans were the

stereotypes. It's stupid." He says. "That's something I like about CouchSurfing too, it lets people get past stereotypes and see the person. So if you know one person you like you see that oh, I don't hate that country. Because what is that country? It's just people."

Around 1AM we get into the taxi. The ride is long, and I wonder if we're still in Barcelona. As the taxi drops us off, I become alarmed. There are no cars or people, just a line of abandoned buildings on an empty street. Molly and I exchange glances.

"So what kind of place is this?" I ask Roger.

"Well I didn't want to tell you until we were in person," he says. "Because I didn't want to freak you out, but it's actually a swinger's club... during the week at least. That's why I told you it's only a club on Fridays. Fridays is normal though, don't worry."

Whether I'm worried or not is past the point now. We're here, and we don't have a way back unless Molly and I want to walk through the dark in an area we don't know. The five of us walk to the end of the street, and I'm relieved when we start to hear something as we get closer: a steady, pulse of a beat.

From the outside, the building is red brick with a spray painted seahorse. A group of people are standing in front of the doorway as a man with a goatee and ear piece urges them inside. Roger calls him over.

"This is the guy that puts these on," he tells me as we introduce ourselves.

"Welcome," the man says. "You guys can go on in, we're trying to get everyone inside. We don't want to attract too much attention."

At the front desk, Roger has to give them a card that's black with the green

writing and symbol of “Le Bako.” They also check to make sure that we, his guests, are on the list. Once we pass the desk, there’s a coat check where a woman asks for our phones and cameras. They’re forbidden inside. She zip locks them in plastic baggies and puts numbered bracelets on our wrists.

From these first, questionable impressions, I expect the place to be a grungy, down-and-dirty hole-in-the-wall and exhibitionist free-for-all; but I’m completely wrong. The first room opens up to a center bar with swanky chairs, blue lighting, and two-story ceilings. The right wall is taken up by a photograph of a naked woman. The DJ and a second bar are upstairs, but first Roger shows us what he meant by swinger’s club.

“You don’t have to worry, like I said, Friday is just a regular club night. I’ve never been here on another night, but it’s interesting to see the rooms,” He says.

“They’re not in use right now or anything.” The bar on the ground floor is a hallway that opens up to the right. First, there are three wooden houses about the size of sheds.

“What are those?” I ask.

“Look inside,” he says. Each house has two, fist-sized holes drilled into the walls, peep holes. Inside are beds.

“No way.”

“Yeah but that’s not the best one, come on.”

The hallway has four other “hidden” rooms roped off for the night. One is a cinema room with a wrap-around couch, one room doesn’t have a floor - just pillows, one room has a king sized bed with a white canapé, wavy chair, and chains drilled into the walls, and the last room, Roger’s favorite, has blue lighting, a king-sized, round, ataman bed in the center, and plush, velvet cushions lining the walls around it. There are curtains

and disco balls.

“Do people actually use these rooms?” I ask.

“I guess so,” Roger answers. “Sorry are you freaked out? I don’t mean to freak you out. I think it’s kind of cool actually. Not like I do that or anything, but just to know that there’s people that actually do, that that sort of thing exists.”

“Yeah it’s interesting.”

“Yeah.”

Upstairs, a neon-red sign flashes “sex party” next to a faux-window of New York-style buildings, an easy distinction revealed by the rectangular, standardized-steel skyscrapers compared to Barcelona’s more colorful, imaginative buildings filled with the cracks and character of time. As I weave in-and-out of ravers, their pupils dilated as the large-rimmed bowls of their drink glasses, I notice that there aren’t any real windows. The building is like a renovated Chinese factory, but instead of barring windows to keep workers in, this “factory” bars its windows to keep reality out. We are a bloc, unified by our being the outskirts of societal blocs. We are more like a circus bloc, where the shadows and forgotten absurdist outcasts of society stagger forward into the performance light.

And yet, drifting within this seemingly third dimension of reality, a fantasy world of liberation and celebration of social, cultural, and sexual taboos, I don’t feel threatened by Le Bako as a “cult” of open hedonism. Rather, I feel more fascinated by Le Bako as an expression, a stark and radically naked component of the human condition. A lift of the mask. An exposed wound, the folds of protective flesh flapping open, gaping into the yellow, fatty tissue that the faint may not wish to see, but whose existence comprises an

equal, existential element of the human body, all the same.

My own curiosity concerning the normal lives and daily activities of “these people” causes me to stop in introspection of my own, patterned thoughts. *These people.* The barrier I’ve built to distance myself between “them” is grossly evident. In my culture, and from my family background, the hobbies that “these people” participate in could be considered socially unacceptable, if not labeled as completely immoral. Yet I cannot ignore a kindled admiration, perhaps even jealousy, I have for the underlying principles that have bound this no-boundary scene.

I watch a handsome couple in their early thirties dance. The woman has a dark bob that cups the bottom of her ears and a skirt that flits around her ankles as she moves. She faces her partner, hands clasped behind his neck, forehead touching forehead, but maintaining a perceivable space between their bodies for their hips to move comfortably. They seem innocent somehow, even if I know that they are probably swingers and that we are in a sex club. Their movements are light and honest, and they lack the predator-prey relationship that I’ve witnessed in some of Barcelona’s larger clubs and most United States’ clubs. The man does not grasp the woman’s hips possessively, and he does not tug her to him with the greed of a toddler, hoarding his toy selfishly in his arms, not because he wants the toy so much as he doesn’t want another to have it. *It’s mine.*

The irony strikes me. I’ve experienced less sexual harassment, unwanted attention, and unwarranted advances in this sex club than I have in all of Barcelona’s public clubs. In fact, I haven’t encountered it once. No man has tried to corner me into dancing. No strange hands have tried to find a place on my hips, not by Roger or his friends, and not by any inconspicuous swinger slipping through the crowds. I am

comfortable here, I am free.

And as Molly, Roger, Jordi, and I dance within the blur of lights and sounds and movement that drone out the darkness and alarm clocks and stagnancy that envelops the world outside, Roger spontaneously grabs my face and plants an impassioned kiss on my cheek, yelling over the mash of the turntable and cries of the crowd.

“I don’t know how to say, but I feel connection here! I am very happy to meet you and be here!” His grin is wide and easy, making me think of him even more like a Cheshire cat. I smile and wrap my right arm around to give his shoulder a friendly squeeze. His kiss is not tarnished with romantic intention. It is pure, a pure and earnest expression, a physical symbol of the personal boundaries broke between us. He is kissing the cheek of our connection, similar to the way this moment was kissing the cheek of a deeper meaning.

We dance with the flow of gypsies, with the nonsense of madmen, with the frenzy of windsocks strewn from willow branches in the whistles of a storm. Sometimes, I wonder if I’m crazy for being here. If I’ve lost all common sense, if I’m all out of it; and I cackle slightly to myself imagining what my friends or former self might say seeing me in the midst of these strangers, these crooked and cock-eyed, these ragged and magic sorts of madness littering the club in the way that sparkling shards of glass litter the streets.

And when our guts have been punched of their gusts, and my hair is sticking to my forehead, and we have spun like bent hula hoops around the dance floor, Molly and I half-lidded and half-heartedly decide to leave. Le Bako is still churning with die-hards, but I guess to myself that it’s around 6AM, though I have no way of telling without our

cell phones or without a window's natural light. On the way out, we stop by the counter to pick up our phones and cameras, tuck them into our purses without caring to look, and step outside.

Then we laugh. We laugh until we're hysterical with streams of tears sludging down our hot faces. The sun is center in the sky. It is not 6AM, it is not 6Am at all; the sun is center in the sky like it's been waiting to play a joke on us while we were lost and disoriented, somewhere within Le Bako's distorted, black hole of the known, and reality and time.

Seven: When it Aches

For some tourists, Le Bako may have been too much. But for me, it was a glimpse into one of Barcelona's forgotten corners, into an attic that tourists hadn't yet infiltrated, a free haven for local subculture. Because, after all, like Mo Ya said "people is culture."

July25 Mo Ya

Hey Spiderwoman

July25 Kathryn Giroux

Haha hey how's it going?

July25 Mo Ya

oh working and these boring things

Are you going to bed early tonight

July25 Kathryn Giroux I don't know, why what's up?

July25 Mo Ya I told you I feel I have duty to show you Catalan music
I'm going to a show tonight
Is a friend's brother, they sound really good

July25 Kathryn Giroux sweet I'm in

July25 Mo Ya even if it's 8 euros?

July25 Kathryn Giroux even if it's 8 euros

July25 Mo Ya Okay lets meet at same spot, 23h

July25 Kathryn Giroux Okay see you then

July25 Mo Ya Coolbeans

It is my last week in Barcelona and I am already starting to feel the tug, not just from those I've left behind, but also from my new life, from those, like Mo Ya, who I am about to leave.

For it is a new life. Three months could hardly pass as a full-blown relationship, but it is certainly enough time for a steady fling. Barcelona may have only been my

lover, but I have grown familiar with the bends and curves of her body's streets, the stirrings of her sleep, how she looks in the morning when her face is smeared and cosmetic-free. I know our tiffs, our exasperations and short-lived frustrations with one another. I've learned that I sometimes need space and calm to think outside of her whirlwind of commotion, but it's an easy fix to take the train out to the Montserrat mountains, or find a quiet corner of a park to pace and simply wander alone in my head. I've also learned that I don't always fit in her scene. I love her back-alley characteristics, her innermost secrets and her alternative side. But I don't like the way that she sensationalizes herself for those who don't know her quite as well.

The balcony of my apartment overlooks a caged picnic area below and the backside of apartment flats strung with clothes lines. In the distance, above the fence and satellite dishes is the silhouette of Mount Tibidabo, where one can see the outline of the church on top that, from a distance, is reminiscent of The Magic Kingdom castle. While I kill time waiting to meet with Mo Ya, I drag out a plastic Ikea chair to sit on the terrace tiles and watch the sunset. Molly joins, and we gaze on as the mountain's bulk and upward sky turn a charcoal blue, with the top edge of the mountain lined light yellow, and the center strip where the castle figure stands highlighted pink.

"It's weird, you know," I say.

"Yeah," Molly answers.

"What do you think you'll do when you go back?"

"I don't know. Go back to the same old shit, I guess."

"Yeah." We watch the sky colors start to fade.

"What about you?"

“Finish school,” I say.

“Then what?”

“Who knows.”

“Do you think you’d ever come back?”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t like to,” I pause and glance up at a flyaway section of my bangs. “But there’s so many other places. I guess I used to think traveling was hard or something, or more scary. Now that I know, I’d want to try somewhere new. Probably outside of Western Europe. Maybe Asia. Or South America. You?”

“I could see myself coming back.”

“You do speak Spanish.”

“Yeah.”

“I just can’t get over how weird this is,” I repeat.

“Yeah.”

“I’m kind of freaking out.”

“Me too.”

We sit on the balcony until we can no longer see the furrows in each others faces, then walk back inside, leaving the chairs behind. I change into the black, harem pants that I had picked up for five euros on a street I’ve long-forgotten the name of, paired with an army green tank top and flower necklace. Molly is doing her makeup, getting ready to meet her own summer Spanish romance that is bringing her to some secret bunker spot. I wish her a good night and set out to meet Mo Ya, my unwashed, beach hair trailing in golden streams behind me once I hit the cool breeze of night.

Mo Ya’s outfit is amusingly color-coordinated with mine. We kiss cheeks and

take the stairs underground to the metro. Stepping onto the metro car, we stand by the doors gripping onto the silver poles.

“How’s the thesis going?” Mo Ya asks.

“Oh you know.”

“Uh oh.”

“Not uh oh, it’s just going.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sometimes I get afraid that my intentions won’t translate to the reader.”

“It can be good to have things up for interpretation.”

“Yeah, like some interpretation. But what if you try to say one thing and people think you’re saying the complete opposite. Like *Anna Karenina*.”

“Who’s that?”

“It’s a book by Tolstoy about this woman. She was supposed to be a kind of evil woman, immoral and bad, because she is having this affair, and that was the lesson, he mean to write it to tell people not to be like her. But instead, everyone ends up sympathizing with her. Like me, I like her. Cause everyone see that yes, she did bad things sometimes, but that made her more human. People see she has a heart.”

“Huh, well even if that’s not what he intended, it seemed to have worked out for him.”

“Yeah I guess.”

Mo Ya points at the next stop, Joanic, and says it’s ours. While I’m pretty familiar with the Gracia neighborhood, especially since Mauro lives around here, I have

never thought to get off at metro stop Joanic or to explore its surrounding area in Gracia.

The bar is called Heliogabal and it's small and already shoulder-to-shoulder with Spaniards. The left wall is painted red with a small stage in the corner that is barely raised or distinct from the rest of the bar space. We step up to the fold-out table with the cash box to buy tickets, where Mo Ya and the seller argue a while before he turns to me and says, "they're sold out, he says they reached capacity." We walk back outside and stand against the building wall.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

"I really want to see this show."

"Yeah me too, it's a bummer."

"Well, I've got idea. Let me try," Mo Ya says. As we start walking in he turns to me and remarks, "let me talk though. But try to pretend you understand what we're saying, and don't say anything." I press my lips together and nod. Mo Ya and the man selling tickets talk in Catalan for a few minutes while I stand quietly. Mo Ya gestures at me and the man looks over; I make a weary smile, trying not to overdo it as I don't know the context of their conversation. Mo Ya steps back against the wall, no tickets in hand.

"No luck?"

"No he'll sell them. We just have to wait a few minutes so other people won't see." My face lights up, and we stand to the side until the doorway is clear again. After we buy our tickets, we step back outside to hang out where it's cool until the band starts playing and I ask him how he convinced the man to let us in.

"I can't tell you that," Mo Ya says.

"What? How come?"

“I can’t.”

“Come on tell me.”

“No it’s a secret.”

“I want to know!” He looks at me and takes a drag off his cigarette.

“I told him that you were from out of town and that I had told you I’d show you a true Catalan band.”

“A true Catalan band, huh?”

“Yeah I thought he might go for it. It’s a good image for them you know. They want people to see the *real* Catalonia.”

We hear a man’s voice over the microphone. Mo Ya puts out his cigarette and we push our way back into the human fortress. We grab a couple beers to hang onto, then post up in the back against the wall, where we’re only being crushed from three sides instead of four. No one has an inch to give. Triangle strings of gold and red striped Catalan flags hang from the bar’s ceiling. When I look around the room, I notice that I’m the only blonde or fair-skinned person in the bar.

The bands, first the Mujeres and then Aliment, have a sort of punk-surfabilly style of music mixed with light screaming and lots of sweat and energy. I hadn’t been able to guess if Mo Ya would be a dancer or not, but he is, at least for the space permitting. He bangs his head with the rest of the crowd, shaking his shoulders loosely.

In one of the last songs that everyone seems to know, the chorus hits and the crowd starts jumping. Back home, when I’ve been to smaller shows like this, I remember the dancers being the minority of the crowd, while the majority of onlookers simply stood and stared, sometimes nodding their head slightly. Here, there isn’t one body that isn’t

bouncing. Mo Ya and I get separated from a few people squeezed between us, but we catch sight of each other's heads bobbing out from the crowd and laugh when we both jump up at the same time, able to see the other for a fleeting second before we disappear again. It's outrageously warm, and the wisps of hair falling out of my pony tail are wet. But I keep jumping with everyone else; like packs of pogo sticks, we spring up from the pavement.

The band ends with a heartfelt speech about Catalonia, or so I guess from the few words I can pick up and the audience's reaction. I'm reminded that I'll be leaving Catalonia in a few days, and I listen somberly, suddenly resentful that the band can not play longer and of my awareness that I have past the climax of my own story here in Catalonia. Everyone else seems to share similar sentiments; as soon as the band starts to pack up, we all clear out, knowing that the night will not get better than this, and we might as well ramble on than try to hang on to the bar when it is emptied and quiet.

The metro closes at midnight on Wednesdays so Mo Ya and I start to walk back. Neither of us care to shell out the money for a cab ride, plus we both like to keep our legs moving, keep our feet planted in the concrete of the city streets rather than stagnant in a cab, stuck behind glass windows. I'm also still trying to cling onto the night as long as I can, wring it like a towel, squeeze out the last drops of memories that I can get. I feel myself shrinking, no longer because I feel small in this city, but more so because I'm starting to feel myself disappearing from Barcelona.

After we talk a bit about the bands and how great the show was, Mo Ya and I start talking about travel. He's been backpacking a lot, and I ask him which trip was his favorite.

“About a year ago my ex-girlfriend and I went backpacking and hitchhiking through Mexico, it was absolutely amazing, I really love Mexico, you should go there.”

“What about the drug wars? They say it’s unsafe, did you guys ever have any problems?”

“No not really,” Mo Ya says. “If you have money you’re fine. But I would say you shouldn’t go hitchhiking there unless you know Spanish. There were a couple times when people stopped us to ask where we were going or who we are. It was fine and they let us go when we explained we were just backpackers, but it might not be so good if you don’t know what they’re asking or how to explain.”

“For sure,” I say. “What’s your craziest story in Mexico?” Mo Ya thinks for a couple minutes before responding.

“Well there was this one time when we got picked up by this family. So it was a truck and there’s a man in the driver’s seat, his wife in the passenger seat, then there was one of those small, middle seats that they had their kid, like this baby. The guy was telling us how he was a cop and showed us his badge, but he was drunk.”

“Did you know that when you got in the car?”

“No I didn’t know until after we are driving. He starts talking to us then pulls out this paper bag and starts driving with one hand and drinking with the other, and he was driving so fast I think we are going to make some accident you know and die. Then the baby --” Mo Ya is cut short as he starts to laugh.

“This fucking baby is just in the front and he doesn’t have a seat belt on, so every time we turn, the baby goes like waaaaa,” Mo Ya tosses himself back and forth, flailing dramatically, imitating the baby. I start to laugh too.

“But he was like a stealthy baby. Like sometimes it seemed like he knew and he’d get all ready for the corners so he was like doosh doosh,” Mo Ya juts his head forward, puts his arms out like he’s surfing, and jabs his neck back and forth. I’m almost in tears I’m laughing so hard.

“That fucking baby.”

“Yeah that’s pretty crazy,” I say. “So have you hitchhiked a lot before that?”

“No that was actually the only time, but I am getting ready to go after I finish working at the hostel.”

“Where are you going?”

“I want to take a year to try and hitchhike to Asia and back. I don’t really care which specific countries. It’s more of a thing for the journey you know.”

“Who are you going with?”

“Just me.”

“What about your roommates or your friends? Won’t you miss them?”

“Yeah of course I miss people. But I think you have to do what’s good for you. You can’t make plans around other people, because they’ll eventually make their own plans too. There will always be new roommates or new friends. Everyone is on their own, so we have to do what we want, what we know we need to do for us.”

“Why do you feel like you need to do that then?”

“I need to be able to respect myself. I think when you travel like that, like really on your own, you learn stuff about you.”

“Yeah I know what you mean.”

“My apartment’s just there, do you want to hang out for a bit longer?”

“Sure, Por que no,” I say, and we walk up to his flat.

In the back are some glass doors that open out to a wooden terrace. Mo Ya’s roommate is sitting on one of the chairs out there, smoking a joint. We sit down next to him and Mo Ya introduces us. I look to the left, where they’re harvesting a small jungle of plants. I look closer.

“Holy marijuana plants,” I say.

“Yeah we have a lot right now. Next month a group of friends are coming to stay for a few months though, we’re just going to tell them to take as much as they want.”

“Is weed legal here?” I ask.

“Yes as long as you don’t sell it. Each person can have his own plant but only about this tall,” Mo says measuring his hands about a foot away from each other. “Our neighbors don’t care though, we don’t sell it so it’s not so big.”

“I think its like a big thing in United States?” Mo Ya’s roommate asks me.

“Yeah, you can get in a lot of trouble,” I say.

“Nobody cares here,” he says. “If it’s just in your own house.”

“I’ve actually never even seen marijuana plants in real life.’

“Really?” Mo Ya asks.

“Yeah, not full plants like that. Do you have names for them?”

“Actually, yes we do.”

“Introduce me.”

“Well the one there by the window, that’s The Stalker. When I wake up in the morning I always catch him watching me when I sleep. Then that tall one in the very back right corner, that’s The Survivor. We thought he was going to die for sure, but he

survived.”

I laugh and Mo Ya’s roommate asks me if I know how to say anything in Spanish. I’m about to rattle off the normal few sentences I know on how to introduce myself, but then I remember a phrase that Mauro had taught me.

“Ni puta idea,” I say. Mo Ya and his roommate burst out laughing; it’s the Spanish equivalent to “no bloody idea.” Not the most polite phrase, but as Mauro explained, a slang phrase that everyone our age uses when talking amongst themselves.

“That’s good, that’s good,” Mo Ya’s roommate says and smiles. We start talking about more slang phrases we know in each language, and Mo Ya tells his roommate about “cool beans” which makes him laugh.

“You want to hear really funny story though?” Mo Ya asks me.

“Yes.”

“Okay so lately we are thinking about starting this website,” Mo Ya begins. His roommate seems to guess where the story is going as he already starts to smile, shaking his head and covering his face with his hand.

“We want it to be like a place to post artwork and display art for free and get to see other artists work too. So we were trying to think of a good name, like something clever you know, but it’s not as easy when English is not what you speak first. And we were thinking like, hmmm, what can we say for a site to share art. Share art... hmm.”

Mo Ya pauses, looking off into the distance and starting to chuckle slightly to himself.

“So we go, hey, we got it! We’ll just combine the words. Share art -- we’ll call it shart!”

“Oh noo,” I say and start laughing.

“You know it then, what that means?” Mo Ya’s roommate asks me.

“Yes, yes I know what it means,” I say, still smiling.

“See you know that because you speak English first. But we go online to google ‘shart’ just to make sure it wasn’t someone else’s thing. But then we saw what it meant...”

“It’s a good thing you looked it up first.”

“Yeah. It might be bad.” Mo Ya’s roommate tells us he’s going to bed, and we tell him goodnight as he wanders back into the flat. Mo Ya and I sit without talking for a few minutes, staring out into the night.

“Can I ask you something that may be awkward?”

“Sure, go for it.”

“I want to know if you’d let me kiss you?”

I freeze in place, and look up at Mo Ya, who’s staring at me intently. He knows I have a boyfriend, we’ve talked about him several times. But I consider how many hours we must have talked, staying up until six in the morning telling each other our life stories. God, it probably looks that way, I think, suddenly feeling guilty for being here, at his apartment, so late.

“I’m sorry Mo Ya, but I have a boyfriend,” I say, looking down at my hands.

“Yes I know this but... I don’t know. Here it’s like boyfriend or girlfriend it’s not so big of deal. I just thought you might want to.”

“No I’m sorry,” I say.

“Sorry I don’t mean to make it awkward.”

“No it’s not a big deal,” I tell him, trying to make my tone sound normal.

“Yes it is, now you feel awkward.”

“No it’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

In a different time, in a different context, and with a different relationship status, maybe I would have considered kissing Mo Ya when he asked. After he stops apologizing, we talk for a little longer, but we’re both too aware of each other’s embarrassment for conversation to continue comfortably. He makes a comment about the time, and I take advantage of the opportunity to excuse myself to go home and go to bed. Standing at the doorway, preparing to leave, Mo Ya looks defeated and I feel helpless in this last moment of our friendship. I want to say something that will make us forget the fracture, let us leave on a better note. I want to tell him that he shouldn’t take it personally, that I do feel a connection, maybe not in a romantic sense, but I want to tell him that that doesn’t make the connection any less real, any less profound. I want to tell him he’s one of the most inspiring people I’ve met, that who knows, maybe if I didn’t have that life back home, if I didn’t have that home and that boy that I loved back in Michigan, something might have happened. It’s not him, I want to explain that it’s just one of those things where time and circumstance and place and past and all of those other factors are just not aligned. But I don’t say any of this.

“This is probably the last time I’ll see you,” is what I actually say.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, I guess it is,” Mo Ya says scratching his head and looking at his feet. He looks up.

“I’m really sorry, again. For like, being awkward and stuff.”

“Really, don’t worry about it.”

“It was nice meeting you.”

“Yeah you too.” We give each other a hug, being careful to keep a hovering space between us, and then I leave. The door closes behind me, and I don’t feel like it’s real, like it’s really over. It still seems like I should be going to my regular meeting with Mauro later this week. I feel like I’m being swallowed, like I’m being sucked into a black hole in space, like soon it will be as if my stay here in Barcelona never even happened.

“But I think it’s also very hard,” Mauro had told me the first night we met. “People come but they leave. Six month, year, three month... I make friend and I love sometimes people. But then they leave.” Knowing that that was the last time I’d ever see Mo Ya or any of the other CouchSurfers that I had met, I could sympathize with Mauro’s struggles.

Going into CouchSurfing, you know that it is temporary, a fleeting interruption from reality, a break in the routine. There is a life you’ve invested in back home, and loved ones waiting for your return. You have roots. You have to finish what you’ve started growing. But near the end of your experience, that line between your “real life” and your “life abroad” begins to fade, and you start to question how concrete that “real life” really is. You start to feel like you’re dislodging. You start to realize that your city is but a bubble, and you start to gain the bittersweet awareness that your best friend or boyfriend are but shooting stars in the galaxy; they do not shine any less bright, but they aren’t quite as rare as you might have once liked to imagine.

Going into CouchSurfing, you have to take the experience for what it is: one of those sudden, almost spiritual occasions where strangers surrender their social walls for a night, and find a certain clarity in the vulnerability of another’s soul. A flash of meaning,

a sense of unification in one synapse of the rapidly multiplying human network. Electric, fulfilling, stimulating. You may have a network, a map of people to visit should you ever return, but going into CouchSurfing, you must know that you will probably never return, you are not likely to see these people again. You must know that CouchSurfing may create lifelong memories, but it is not about creating lifelong friends.

So when it starts to ache -- when you cross back to the other side, and find your past life preserved -- the cherry wood armoire unmoved, your dream catcher hung stagnant above the bed, that same, dusty book on your shelf - you can stare at the cracks in your ceiling and think of Barcelona. You can imagine Nika, cynical and maternal, shooting a stink eye at the person who dares to ask how she feels, stubborn and bandaged and restless with a long board strapped to her side. You can imagine Gyula, quiet and contemplative, poised before a Vietnamese lamp maker. You can imagine Mauro and Gabriel, sitting cross-legged in aviators, playing guitar over the brick terrace, serenading the Gracia alleys of Catalan artists and squatters and pickpocketers and rat-tailed men below. You can imagine Damian in his accounting suit, eyes furrowed at work, carefully calculating his next trip to his new city of the month. And you can imagine Mo Ya, packing his backpack, marching down the side of the road like a martyr, en route to sacrifice his old life, not looking back, for the holy path walking toward the light of travel, and change, and the new.

When it starts to ache, you can imagine all of these people like old dreams, like phantoms that have simply passed through you, have permeated the rib cage around your heart. And because you ache, you can be at ease. CouchSurfing may create lifelong memories, but it does not create lifelong friends. It creates a lifelong path, this lifelong

notion that at the core of the Earth is a single, consolidated, iron-nickel mass. And it doesn't matter where you end up, if you end up in Spain or Switzerland or Chile or Czech Republic or France, if you move across the country or if you move back. It doesn't matter where you end up, you can always drill deep beneath humanity's feet, and you can always reach that inner core, solid and shining.

After I return home, the culture shock is more suffocating than that I'd experienced abroad. Everything is exactly the same, but paradoxically, fundamentally changed. It's like I've returned from space, and time has held still at home while I aged, too far out in the galaxy to remain untouched by what I've seen. When my mother picks me up from the airport, her dam breaks, shedding tears that free-flow into the soft of my shoulder. It is the second time I've ever seen her cry. She has supported me the whole four months of my absence, has urged me to take advantage of the opportunity, has been ecstatic for my departure and insistent that I not think twice about her or the other family members I was leaving behind. But through her blubbers, seven simple words slip through.

"I'm sorry," she says after the first tear breaks. Then after she loses control:

"I missed you so much."

So I squeeze her like all mothers ought to be squeezed, and let her cling to me like I did to her as a child when she'd return home from work each evening.

My friends don't have quite as emotional as a response other than that caring unease that makes them eager to slide smoothly back into the normalcy of friendship. They have an initial, deep-felt fear, produced from a deeper-felt love, that the friendship might have grown distant from our distance. For my first day, we sit on the porch of our

new house, sharing a few beers over casual conversation to stir nostalgia for our shared history and reassure us that nothing, nothing has changed at all. It couldn't. It mustn't.

But it has. The sharp edges of my deepest and most long-lasting friendship have somehow been filed smooth. Somewhere between her adventures through South Africa, and my own through Spain and France, with an overlap of travel time that caused us to be apart for eight months, we have changed. After the beers have us talking easy again, free from the guards erected from the initial shock of feeling slightly foreign from someone so familiar, we admit our past hang ups. We admit the nasty, ugly feelings that had lain dormant as lava beneath the surface of our friendship the last year before we left. And we reconnect in the same way we always have, but different -- stronger. When I hug her I know that our friendship will hold the same value, the same connection, but in different and important ways. We are reborn by the notion that we have shed all of the bullshit, all of the ugly emotions that had plagued our true characters from accepting each other's true selves.

Yet there are other relationships that suffer. I discover that the boyfriend I left committed to, and remained faithful to, is not who I want to return to. Nothing has changed between us except essentially everything. My self-perception has developed too independent, too liquefied, and too restless to settle snugly into the relationship like I once was. I still love him, but if I'm honest with myself, I know that I don't want to be with him, not now, not for my senior year, when I will start to make fundamental decisions about what steps I'd like to take next, decisions that may alter the ultimate direction of my life.

CouchSurfing, somewhat sardonically, plays a direct effect in the break up too.

When you only have one day, one night, to stay on someone's couch or meet up and try to become friends, there is no choice but to cut out the bullshit. You have to strip your life and yourself of all the unremarkable, all of the petty things you may get hung up on, and show them what really matters. You have to find out what really makes up your guts. And in doing so, I had been amazed by the sudden, electric jolts that fused. The more confident I had grown in my ability to strike a stranger's rock and create sparks of meaningful connection, the more skeptical I became of my more kindled fire's authenticity.

But the effects are greater, more generalized than those few specific instances. My ex-boyfriend, with whom I remain close friends, tells me a conversation he'd had about me with my best friend.

"I've never seen her this happy." He recounts what she'd said, and when I think about it, her observation is right. After being in contact with so many people from cultures emphasizing different priorities and values, I realize that some of my life's greatest stresses, greatest fears, are based in specific, cultural pressures rather than universal, logical reason. I may not ever be able to sit comfortably for three hours over a café, but I've taken home other pieces of Barcelona with me, like the "work to live" culture in contrast to America's "live to work" culture.

At home, our little blue house is centered in the student ghetto. At the west end of the Vine Neighborhood, propped on the hill overlooking Kalamazoo, is Western Michigan University's East Hall. The statuesque, brick building, with a stretched triangle top supported by six white, formal pillars, stands like an oracle brooding above our city, its great halls now vacant other than some old archives in its gut. Ivy vines grow slowly

over its sides, keeping the building's body warm and romantic. My close friend received her first kiss here, and probably many others have had, and will have, their own here as well. It's the only place I know in Kalamazoo where I can overlook an elevated view of the city span.

Last New Year's Eve, my two best friends and I treaded to the top to watch the sunrise. It was meant to be symbolic, standing upon a legacy of the past as we met our future, standing on top of the hill, on top of the world, waiting for the sun to hit our eyes indicating that the year, and our lives, were reborn again. We declared ourselves new souls. We swore our allegiance to our resolutions, our resolutions that might strip our lives of all of the bullshit, all of the petty things we get hung up on, allowing ourselves to focus on the parts of life, and ourselves, that really shine.

But even the resolutions had been merely good intentions, abstractions that crumbled under the concrete of reality. I had found myself trapped in the same circles, the same ruts and routines. I had found myself afraid of the future, afraid about what I'd do, afraid because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I'd been afraid to stay and afraid to move, paralyzed by doubts in my own instincts, about my own place in the world, as an individual, after the jobs were no longer satisfying, the classes were ended, and my friends were scattered and gone to follow dreams or lovers or both.

Now when I perch at East Hall, I watch other student-ghetto residents ramble up the hill, sleepy-eyed and thankful, to sit on the stoops and let their sight graze the scene. Some try to make a mark on the relic, etching their names or words or sketches in a column or brick. Others merely pause to take a drag, stagger on and into the night. They come and go around me, each one driven by their own story, incorporating the monument

in their own settings, in their own meanings.

As for me, I am still entranced, still immobile by the awe of the city lights and factory beams high on this hill. I still peer over the sprawl, wondering where it will take me. But now I also see the city lights how I saw them in Barcelona: from the castle of Montjuic with Damien, from the mound of Parc Guell with Mauro, from my apartment terrace with Molly, or even the opposite beauty of how the lack of city lights had looked from the mountains of Montserrat or the fields of the Normandy countryside. The world, and my worries, seem a lot smaller now. I look into stranger's faces, and the unknown face of my future, with curiosity rather than cowardice. I wonder what hill I'll eventually lodge upon, and what city I'll overlook when the sun rises again. I hope that I glow with a gut of history. I hope my vines grow with a loving embrace. Wherever it is, I hope characters ramble to come and go and sit on my stoop as they please, etching their mark in my columns and telling tales and love stories from their own rooftops. The world, and my worries, seem a lot smaller now. I believe Petoskey's can make good skipping stones too, even across oceans and seas.



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