

“Reminiscences to a Stranger”

Restless.

Something about me is perpetually and unreasonably restless, physically and mentally. I’ve always felt that I’d be happy elsewhere, no matter where I was. As cruel as it sounds, I distanced myself from friends and family, for I viewed them as obstacles to my eventual escape from monotony. But because I ran so fast – through two new schools and houses in one year – I ran right into self-isolation-induced depression. Still, I kept my pace. I consider this time to be the lowest point in my life, when I walked the world alone, something I now deem an unnecessary evil.

Like a magician, serendipity never reveals its secrets. Amidst my mental health crisis, I discovered that my new school was hosting a study opportunity in Greece. I can’t recall how I came upon the trip, but I was immediately infatuated with the prospect. Greece was an opportunity to “fix” my life the way I always did, by doing the very thing that got me into that very mess: running. Nonchalantly, I presented the idea to my mother. Her glasses rested on her head... her leg rhythmically tapped against the floor. Without looking up from her work, she nodded absentmindedly and told me to start saving. If I could pay for the trip, I could go. I slinked from the room before she realized what she had said.

Then, I worked. I worked at a gelato shop, the first place that would hire me; this is where I learned how coercive desire can be. It causes one to endure exhausting battles and ignore appalling treatment. Customers regarded me with the respect one might give a brick wall. My hands formed blisters that metamorphosed into calluses. However, the most humiliating, gut-wrenching thing I was once forced to do was clean smeared human feces off the bathroom wall. I remember one hand clamped my shirt over my nose, failing to block out the persisting stench. The other hand gripped the end of a mop, shaking as I directed the head haphazardly. But I was getting paid. And if I could only go to Greece, life would be better.

Though my shoes lost their soles to the strain of being my only pair, my friends lost their friend to the goal of saving money, and my hobbies lost their hobbyist to my \$10/hour job, I soon had enough money.

Greece exceeded my expectations. My eyes swell when I remember how I watched the sunset over the Saronic. How the Athenian baristas giggled when I mispronounced epharisto, or “thank you”. How I gripped my friend's hand, running through the rainy, nocturnal streets of Nafplio. How my soul wept when our tour guide whispered her farewell: “Goodbye, my dear.” But especially how, upon entering a bookshop in Olympia, the owner saw right through me – what he saw, I don’t know. He led me to a poetry book, flipped to a poem, and bequeathed the words to my hands. “The City” by Constantine Cavafy. I read it and I saw myself. The man took the book back and flipped to a new poem. “Ithaka”, also by Cavafy. I read it. He retrieved the book and turned to another. I read it; we went on like this.

“How long can I let my mind molder in this place?” “The City” evokes the desire to leave one’s hometown, the apparent source of all problems. Cavafy frankly retorts that discontent cannot be run from; in order to find happiness, one must change their damning mindset. Meanwhile, “Ithaka” alludes to the homecoming of Odysseus: “As you set out for Ithaka/ hope that the voyage is a long one...” Cavafy advises the hero not to think fondly of Ithaka, for the journey homeward will award him priceless physical treasures and moral growth.

Enamored by the contrasting sentiments, I made them my own. I changed my mindset. I will no longer run; I will adventure. I will continue to embark on odysseys, to grow the characteristics required to comfortably face my travels: budgeting, independence, worldliness, planning, confidence. And if traveling elicits the instinct that will eventually lead me home, so be it. “Keep Ithaka always on your mind... But do not hurry the journey at all.”