

What We're Supposed to Do

And the world is cold, but it's beautiful

- "Last to Fall," Starset

Originally, I wasn't supposed to go to Berlin.

I was supposed to go to Prague on a program called Arts and Social Change in the Czech Republic. It's what I thought I wanted for myself; I want to explore how media affects our internal biases—and that affects social change. It felt like the perfect fit.

The day of the Center for Global Education's mandatory meeting for everyone going abroad, I broke down outside one of the buildings on my campus. I was on the phone with my mother, sobbing into the phone while I clutched my lunch tightly in my hands. I had class in ten minutes, but my mother's soothing voice did little to stop the anxiety seizing inside my chest. Student's pretended not to stare as they passed by, but I paid them no mind as I paced back and forth, my face red and blotchy.

My mom was quiet on the other side of the phone as she listened to my worries. She was at work, but she always answered the phone when I called. I had spoken to her the night before about my worries over my study abroad program. I was worried about the visa; I was stressed and I didn't think I'd get it done in time. It just... made me second guess everything.

"Mom... what if I don't actually *want* to go, you know? What if I'm just scared I'll regret not going?"

There was a pause on the other end, and I was worried that I had jumbled my words once again. I always found it hard to articulate my thoughts when nothing but anxious despair consumed my brain.

“That’s a choice you have to make for yourself, Erin. I can’t do that for you. Why don’t you go to the meeting and talk to the global education people and see what they say? Maybe the program isn’t right for you.”

I chewed on my lip but gave a shaky affirmative.

“No matter what you choose, I support you.”

I chose to switch programs to study in Berlin. I thought it would be better for my mental health to be in a less stressful program and go to a country where I at least knew the basics of the language. The visa was much easier. It was a simple application process. I was still stressed about leaving, about whether or not I actually wanted to go, but I had made a decision. I was excited to go—I hoped I would be fine despite my worries.

And I was fine.

I enjoyed my time in Berlin so much that it hurts to know I had to leave before I was supposed to. My time there was cut in half. I struggled while I was there, but nothing great comes without struggle. There were things I thought I should do, things I never did.

I told myself I wanted to travel the world. I told myself I wanted to go out late into the night. I told myself so many, wonderful things that at the end of the day, just weren’t things I wanted to do. Doing these things would prove how fine I was. It didn’t work out that way.

There were days when I only left my room to make myself meals. All the things I thought I would do were slipping through my fingers, but I wasn't necessarily sad.

I had this idea in my head of what my time in Berlin was supposed to be—I should be adventurous, explore everything you can—but looking closer, none of those things were going to make me happy. I don't like travelling excessively. Airports are way too stressful for me to go to on a regular basis. I don't like partying. I don't even like alcohol.

I told my mother before I left that I was afraid I was making my choices based on whether or not I thought I would regret not doing it. Did I *actually* want to study abroad, or was I afraid I'll regret not going? Did I *actually* want to travel around Europe, or was I afraid I'll regret not travelling? Did I want...

The thing is, I've never really thought about what I want. In abstract ways I have—like what I want to do in life and things of that nature—but in the day to day, I tend to push my thoughts and feelings to the side. If I wanted things, I always felt guilty and pretended I never wanted it in the first place. I never put myself first.

Going to Berlin was a huge choice for me, and I couldn't really appreciate that choice until I gave up all the thoughts about what I *should* be doing.

And that came in the form of letting go and just... having fun and admiring the city.

I have trouble walking for long distances due to an issue with my ankles, so I never *really* got to explore Berlin that much, but one weekend, my roommate Abby and I got off at the wrong U-bahn stop. We were trying to get to the Jewish Museum but ended up forty minutes away. We decided to just walk the rest of the way

I think that was when I truly fell in love with Berlin. It was quiet and cold, but it was peaceful. No one really gave the two of us a second glance, no one really cared about the two of us as we walked around the city, but we got to admire the city's beauty.

We passed by a statue of Schiller, a poet—among other things—that I had only encountered briefly in my studies. We stood in the small square for about fifteen minutes, laughing and taking pictures, watching as others did the same. We didn't mind taking a break from our objective as we looked around at the grace of the looming buildings.

I hadn't heard about the monument in the tour we took of the city. I never passed by it again. I know hundreds, if not thousands, of people pass by that statue everyday, but as I stared at it in wonder, I felt as if I had truly stumbled upon something hidden and special.

Two days before I left Berlin, my parents arrived in the city. I would show them around the city before we would go home and enter quarantine. It was rather cold those last few days, and I hunkered down in my windbreaker as I showed my mom and stepdad around all the sights I wished I could get to keep seeing. My heart ached with each monument we passed, each familiar sight I silently said goodbye to.

The night before my flight, I took my parents to Museum Island. Though the museums were closed, I knew I had to take them there. There was something there I knew they would love to see. Who knew when I would be able to come back? I wanted to share everything I could with my parents before I was forced to leave in case I never got the chance to return. It was for me as much as it was for them.

The sun was setting quickly beyond the city's skyline. As I walked down the street, talking quietly with my mom and stepdad, I remembered the first time I walked down this road. It was the first weekend I spent in Berlin, and my roommates and I went to the German History Museum.

As we rounded the corner, I heard my mom gasp beside me as the Berlin Cathedral came into view. The sun caught the domed top, shining like fire on the horizon. They both had stopped walking as they watched. I gave a small smile as I led them to the same spot we took pictures of the cathedral that first weekend.

I stood back as they took pictures. There was a smile on my face and melancholy in my heart, but in the end, I was content. I looked back at the cathedral and thought back at my time in Berlin. I didn't do everything I wanted to do. But I loved my time there. I loved everything I did. I hated that I had to leave. I knew now that I made the right choice in coming to Germany, and though it was cut short, it would forever mold my life.

My time away was bookended in the beautiful sight of the cathedral. It was bookended by standing by in the cold as the sun shone on the city that I have come to love.