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ENG 379: Travel Writing

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“A Change of Scenery”

Lying in bed, with a jam-packed schedule. I hear the hum as our AC unit cuts off. It's my second semester at Montclair State University, away from my family, friends, and life that I've known completely before college. Despite the new room and my roommate Amirah, I was enjoying my newfound independence and life away from home. My alarm goes off, letting me know I have an hour before my 8:00 AM COVID-19-friendly, online creative writing course. As I usually do, I shuffle across the room to our Jack and Jill bathroom, quietly brushing my teeth, with trickling water, allowing my roommate to sleep. Without a second thought, I opened my phone to a text message from my best friend. A link to a news article about a shooting in Wilson, Pennsylvania, about 15 minutes from my hometown, where I knew no such crime growing up. What a horrible wake-up call.

I hesitate, thinking of everyone I knew at that point, classmates, friends, people I haven't spoken to in months. Things like this don't happen where I'm from, I thought to myself naively. My hands tremble from absolute terror of who this could be about. My heartbeat echoed, almost as loud as the hum of the AC unit which switched back on at this point. The dorm was particularly dark and cold, and the only light came from the glow of my phone screen. My stomach turned as my fingers tapped the screen, in complete disbelief at what my eyes were seeing.

Without a second's delay, my jaw clenches and my stomach drops to the floor. I see it was my friend of 20 years, Nikal Jones involved in a shooting early that morning around 12:30 AM. Trying my best not to wake her, my roommate Amirah, sits up groggy from her sleep, confusion turns to concern as she walks over to me stuttering. "My friend just died" I somehow manage to say. She simply squeezes my shoulder and steps out of the room allowing me to completely break down. The silence was loud, the room cold as I lay on the floor. I have class in ten minutes, I think to myself somehow amid things.

I stand on my feet, wash my face, and log in on my Zoom, almost automatically, like a computer program. Tears still stained on my favorite Beyonce nightshirt, I stare blankly at my laptop screen, with my professor's voice muffled by the ringing in my ears. Without realizing that I was being called on to answer a question I had not heard, I bravely apologized for not listening and sent a direct message about what had happened. He responds with an "I understand" and the realization really sets in at the moment. "My friend was killed?", I questioned myself. For the days to come, I was unable to leave my room, stuck in that moment of despair I had experienced just a few days ago. The exception being the treacherous five-minute walk to the dining hall. In my baggy sweats with my hood on. Pizza and the homemade sweet tea were all the comfort I wanted to experience.

I begged my mom to come pick me up from school, I just wanted to be around my mom and hometown friends, assuming we all were in shock. After several no's because "I should stay and focus on my classes" my mom says, and the hour-and-a-half long drive, she didn't know how to say to me, I decided to call a car service and headed back home. The drive was quiet and long, so quiet and long I could feel myself back in my dorm after finding out. I stare out the window, having a sense of survivor's guilt. "Why him?" I think. Cold with the AC on high, I

noticed how shameful seeing everyone was going to be and instantly regretted coming back home.

I had only ever been to a funeral once before Nikals. Two uncles of mine were both killed on NYE 2012. Maybe eleven at this time, I just remember seeing my entire family upset with tissues, and sniffles I can still hear to this day. I didn't think much of the reason for the occasion, but I remember being happy to see my family, and finally some good southern food in my system.

Back at school, I questioned my purpose and position in the world. I had never thought much about death up until this point, and now unable to stop I realized how tough grieving would be for me. Things quickly went left at school. I started to not care about anything, not logging into my Zoom classes, and turning in assignments without any real effort. I realized fast that being away from home was too much for me at this point. I finished out my semester, self-isolating, self-medicating, unable to do anything without my dab pen, trying to fill the void that I now felt in my mind. "Do things get easier" I think on repeat. Each day blurrier than the next, I slip back into a cycle of sleepless nights and cold pizza. I decide to leave half-way through my spring semester.

Back home, right before my 21st birthday, not in school and jobless, my mom decides to take me to Las Vegas, Nevada. "You need a change of scenery," she says, her voice softer than usual. I stared blankly out of my living room window, the window I have known for my entire life, but something about it now was eerie. Without too much belief in the 'why', In why I needed a change of scenery, I nod my head. Truthfully, I had no clue what I needed, but for the first time in months, I felt excited.

As we boarded the plane, we sat in the exit row right before first class seats ahead. We were asked very seriously, “If in case of an emergency are you able to assist”, I looked at Mother first, as she let out a stern “Yes”, and I followed suit. I sneak a peak through the curtains, noticing the small pods that first-class passengers were seated in. “How much are first-class tickets?” I asked my mom. “Double the price of what we paid for our seats”, I sigh. “How can people afford to pay for first-class seats on a flight that's only 4 hours” I thought to myself. For the first time in what felt like years, I thought about my future, and how comfortable first class must be.

As the plane hums loudly, my mind drifts back to that morning, back to the funeral. I felt like I was moving through time, being pulled between what was and what could have been. I later learned the name for this Mental Time Travel or MTT. Claudia Casido and Ivana Patane wrote *Effects of the Perceived Temporal Distance of Events on Mental Time Travel and on its underlying brain circuits*. Claudio mentions “... MTT is the cognitive ability to re-experience past events and imagine future scenarios (Tulving [1985](#)). MTT enables humans to disengage from the “here and now” spatio-temporal location and to envision past or future episodes” (Casido). Listening to the plane buzz, as water lightly trickled on my forehead, I felt I had something to look forward to.

We land in Las Vegas, the heat hits me like the first steps into a sauna after a workout. Immediately I’m immersed in a world full of neon lights, billboards the size of movie screens, musical street performers, and hotels that could be a castle. As we walked, I felt something unfamiliar—distraction, joy maybe. It had been about three months since his death and for the first time, I wasn’t succumbing to the grief that my heart was feeling. Our first stop was the Bodies Exhibit which explained clearly what happens when we donate our bodies to science. I

was able to learn just how intricate and resilient the body is. I slowly walk by the many laid-out bodies, touching the glass that it was encumbered in, in total disbelief at what our lungs, kidneys, and even our brains looked like. Everything was cold, some had the “Do Not Touch” label written in bold print, leaving me with my eyes wide and camera out.

My mortality never dawned on me until this moment. Living felt more unbelievable more so now than ever. Later as I pick at my chicken alfredo, slurping down my Pinot Noir,, I look at my mom in adornment. The words “I guess you were right” leave my lips, as a spoonful of red velvet cake with cream cheese icing goes in. “right about what?” she questions with a smirk. “A change of scenery was not just needed but essential” I reply, winking and splitting my cake in half for her.

Works Cited

Casadio, C., Patané, I., Candini, M. *et al.* Effects of the perceived temporal distance of events on mental time travel and on its underlying brain circuits. *Exp Brain Res* 242, 1161–1174 (2024). <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1007/s00221-024-06806-x>