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London Travel Writing

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Morphing out of my Cocoon

On my overnight flight to Heathrow airport, I convinced myself that the plane was going to crash, and I was going to die. Strapped into my seat, staring out over the city of Boston as the plane soared off into the air, the turbulence bouncing me up and down in my seat, my heart pounded inside my chest. My hands trembled, my chest felt tight, and as the plane lifted higher and higher into the air, it became harder to breathe. For the entirety of that five hour flight, anxiety terrorized my mind.

I was prescribed anxiety medication my sophomore year of college. Popping a small white circular pill into my mouth once a day helps take the edge off of my racing thoughts. After the death of one of my close friends, something inside me was triggered, and I've been trying to cope with the aftermath ever since. While the medication helps, I still struggle with the irrational thoughts and fears that creep into my mind.

My professor mentioned a two week travel writing course in my creative nonfiction class one afternoon during the fall semester. Exploring the world was always something I wanted to do in the future. Whether it be during college or after. After switching my major and discovering a newfound passion for writing after struggling through a nutrition degree for two and a half years, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity. But as I sent in my application, and the departure

date came closer and closer, my anxiety worsened at the thought of navigating a new place on my own.

I've always been an introverted person. Even before my anxiety progressed. I was quiet, shy, timid. It was hard for me to do things on my own. To put myself out there and move out of my comfort zone. I have kept myself in a cocoon for years, not letting myself grow and morph into a new version of myself. A version that does not let her anxiety define her. My hope for this trip was to do as much as I could in my own company. People tell you that studying abroad changes you. While I think that is rather cliche, I secretly hoped that would be the case. I wanted London to teach me how to be a different person. One that can do things on her own without worrying what other people were thinking about her. How whatever situation I'm in could end in the worst possible outcome. I find comfort in doing things with other people. Following their lead. Letting others navigate the unknown while I followed behind in their shadow. Watching them maneuver their way through the unexpected twists and turns life throws at them while I watch from the comfort of the sidelines.

My second day in London I decided to take the tube alone. Standing at the entrance of Paddington station, a short ten minute walk from my hostel, I tapped my oyster card and stepped through the entrance gate. I replayed the directions I had burned into my mind over and over again. Board the Bakerloo line. Southbound. Platform one. Ride the tube for four stops. Exit at Regent's Park. Walk fifteen minutes. Using the signs overhead as a guide, and forcing myself to ask a worker for a little guidance, I made my way to the platform. Standing next to the edge of the tracks, my anxiety began to creep in. My thoughts were racing. *What if I couldn't figure out how to get back? Should I just turn around now and see what everyone else is doing?* Before I

could make up my mind, the yellow lights of the oncoming train lit up the tunnel, the screeching sound of the tracks ringing in my ears. The doors slid open in front of me. For a second I froze. Staring into the carriage, people rushing to get in and out beside me, I made up my mind. I stepped onto the train.

Waking up in my cramped hostel bed, the room was silent. Pushing back the curtains, the sound of honking horns and muffled conversations from the sidewalks below flooded through the window. A free day from assignments and excursions left me questioning what I wanted to do. With everyone else taking off on their own adventures, I looked through some of the places I had initially wanted to visit. As a girl with a guilty pleasure in rom com books and movies, Primrose Hill was a place I wanted to have my own Bridget Jones's Diary experience. After a previous tube taking success, I rode the thirty minute ride with ease. Walking up the winding dirt path of the hill alone, I got to take in the London skyline on my own terms. I felt an unfamiliar feeling of independence. The opportunity to do whatever I wanted to do whenever I wanted to do it. I took in my surroundings at my own pace. Picked a place for lunch I thought looked appealing. Spent an hour perusing a bookshop without worrying about anyone else's time constraints. I felt free for the first time in a long time.

Friday night I sat alone in the corner of a dimly lit restaurant. With a glass of wine in hand, I patiently waited for my pomodoro mozzarella, peering at the pairs and groups of people scattered across the restaurant. I found myself thinking about how this situation would typically be my worst nightmare. Sitting alone at a table for one, surrounded by people with others. What the other people might think of the girl sitting in the corner alone. What they might say. Instead, I

enjoyed my meal in peace, caught up on a few chapters of my book, and sat in a comfortable silence with myself.

Sometime on this trip, my mindset switched. I have let my anxiety rule over me for too long, and with the knowledge that I was itching for change, begging London to morph the way I am impacted by my anxiety, the only way I could make a change was to force myself. To truly believe that I could do it. And it worked.

The last few days I looked forward to my time alone. To seeing the towering walls of Buckingham Palace, visiting the collection of uniquely curated artwork in The National Gallery, reading on a bench by the spewing fountains in Hyde Park. I tried new places to eat in Trafalgar Square, Camden Market, Soho. I learned how to navigate an unfamiliar city on my own. How to ask for help from people you've never met before. Hot to put myself out there and try new things. I found a new sense of confidence in myself. One that wasn't there before these two short weeks. I learned how to do things on my own. To navigate the unknown. How to get through what life throws at me. How to break through my introvertedness and find a new side of myself. I broke out of my cocoon during my trip, and morphed into a woman who can navigate the world on her own terms.