

Gran Canaria

I stepped out of Gran Canaria Airport and into a blanket of darkness, a humid breeze sweeping my hair out of my heavy eyes. I walked to the front of the cab line and attempted to communicate to the driver where I was trying to go. For whatever reason, his GPS couldn't find my destination, so I spent the thirty-minute car ride directing the man using my own phone. I felt uneasy as I sensed his frustration grow. I attempted to calm my anxiety by scanning the view outside the window. The lights lining the highway were merely blurry spots as we whizzed past them. The jagged horizon was just barely visible; mountains differentiated themselves from the sky by just a few shades. Other than the mountains and lampposts, there was nothing else around. Eventually, I ended up outside Kite and Surf Hostel. Forgetting I took a cab and not a pre-paid Uber, I walked away with my tiny carry-on before being chased down by my driver, who reminded me I still owed him money. Flustered and apologetic, I paid for the ride, tipped him (probably more than he deserved), and entered through the propped-open, robin's egg blue door. I checked in, was given a room key, and a chance to put my things down before being whisked away on a tour of the hostel. The hostess brought me to the rooftop, decorated with string lights and beanbags, before explaining how to rent a surfboard (I did not bother to mention that I have never surfed before), and what group meals and outings I could join in on during my stay. I smiled, nodded, and thanked her (I also did not bother to mention that I did not intend to do much socializing during this trip) before hiding away in my room for the rest of the night. I eventually managed to fall asleep despite the loud laughter and of strangers becoming friends right outside my door.

The next morning, I awoke, sticky with sweat, to the movement of the girl on the top bunk. The room had no air conditioning (nor any air flow, for that matter), and about five square feet of floor space. I decided to lie there and rest my eyes until the girl left, and before our other two roommates started their days. I threw on a bikini, grabbed my tote bag, and departed for the beach. I walked no more than two minutes before I reached the sand, as the hostel was only a block from the beach. I kicked off my sneakers (I did not pack any flip flops), laid out my towel, and dropped my bag before lifting my head. A mountain to the left, a mountain to the right, and the bright blue ocean right in front of me. I was in awe. *This was the right place*, I thought to myself.

Just two days before, I was sitting in my Galway apartment when I booked a flight and a bed on a whim. This was right after turning in my last final assignment of the semester. I framed my trip as a celebratory gift to myself for completing a successful semester abroad, but really, I just needed to get away. So far, I had travelled to central and eastern European cities, but after a rough month, I figured my next destination should be somewhere warm, where the sound of the waves could drown out the thoughts in my head.

It was still early in the morning, the clouds and mist a sheer cover over the sun, the wind calling out for the rest of the earth to wake up. I peeled off my T-shirt and shimmied off my shorts. I have never been one to dip my toes in to test the temperature first. I came here for the ocean, and there was nothing that could stop me from being healed by it. I waded in between a rock pile and a pair of old friends, and dunked my head under the next wave that came. The water was gentle and clear, revealing the

schools of tiny, shimmering fish that swarmed me, as if to welcome me to the island. I couldn't help but grin. I floated there with my eyes closed and ear submerged, breathing in the ocean air, meditating to the muffled crashing of the waves. I went back to land, lay out on my towel, and waited patiently for the sun to dry my body. I must have drifted off, and I awoke again to find little crystals of salt dried to my skin where droplets of water once were. I dug through my tote bag for my journal. I am not religious, I do not pray—but I am spiritual,¹ and I do believe in the importance of gratitude, of which I expressed two pages worth before going for another dip in the water.

I decided that I was hungry, so I strolled along the promenade, stopping into little boutiques and souvenir shops on my search for brunch, picking up a bikini and a pair of flip flops for just ten euros. I came across a spot that served acai bowls, and ate in silence at a little table outside. After lunch, I went for one more swim before switching out my sneakers for my new flip flops. I made my way back to the hostel, where I showered and rested before dinner.

Around 6 p.m. I threw on a black maxi shift dress, silver hoops, and black satin ballet flats before making my way back to the same promenade. Although the view was technically the same, dusk gave the scene a new twist to what I'd seen in the daylight, just as magnificent in its own new way. I chose my meal purely based on the view, and found myself at a Korean spot with tables outside, right up against the railing. I was no newcomer to taking myself on dates, though this time, I wasn't sure whether to feel empowered or lonely. These feelings canceled each other out, and so I felt nothing. My

first glass of wine was enjoyed while I admired the mountain ahead, wondering what the landscape would look like if I were to climb it. My second glass came along with my dinner, a bowl of japchae, a meal I only eat once in a blue moon, but a meal I crave often. My third glass of wine was my excuse to sit there a little longer.

I descended the stairs with my ballet flats in hand, eager to feel the sand beneath my feet again. I strolled a mile along the shore until I reached the end of the beach, walking so slowly that no water ever splashed past my ankles. Two songs alternated, playing on a loop through my wired earbuds: “Roseland” and “If I Could Make You Care” by the Cardinals, which I discovered when I saw the Dublin-native band live on one lucky Wednesday night.

I spun around to retrace my steps back up the beach. The sun had set completely. I found myself looking down. I had planned on bringing back sea glass for my sister, who keeps a collection. *How silly of me to search for sea glass in the dark*, I thought to myself. Not two steps later, I came upon a perfect little piece—a rare aqua color that she’d never find at the Jersey shore. I chuckled to myself as I bent down to pick it up. From then on, I couldn’t walk more than five feet without finding more. Green, aqua, deep blue, and clear bits clinked around in my purse.

I found a place on a bench, pulled out my journal, and wrote:

I find myself at an in-between. I feel so old, and yet still so young. None of our traditions is alike. Holidays are just us; everyone is either too old to gather or dead. At the same time, the things I think I should have experienced or figured out by now have yet to happen. A couple of weeks ago, I was getting ready for a concert, listening to music, drinking wine, and dancing around the

living room. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and for the first time, it struck me that what I was looking at was me in my twenties. I truly felt my age at that moment—and I hated it. I want to be a child again, running around in a one-piece, giving no thought to what I looked like so exposed, enjoying a beach day with my extended family, followed by a sleepover at Grandma's. It's an overwhelming feeling to realize your childhood is over. The process of it ending takes years, little bits of innocence and tradition slipping away. There is evidence, but you don't pay attention. That is, until one day, when you look around and the way you've lived—the things you've always counted on—are gone. My childhood is over. And I know that something so wonderful is ahead. I look forward to when my siblings and I build families of our own. I'm excited for the traditions we create. I'm eager to start my career, to fall in love, to have my own place. And these things I know will happen, but until then, I am in this empty in-between. So for this, I will try to be grateful; it's a freedom I didn't ask for, but a freedom I will embrace.