

May 28th  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Today, I spent most of my time on Grandma's porch, looking out on the vast horizon dotted with scraggly underbrush, too weak under the blazing sun. The backs of my knees sat flush against the rotting wood porch, my calves dangling off the side of the platform, legs swinging as they pleased. Mom would have been so mad if she knew Grandma never put up a banister. When I was little, she would always get nervous when I went on the porch. She said it was no place for a four year old—but now that she isn't here, there's nobody to tell me what to do. I know, every person's dream—but it's easy to get lonely. It's really just me and Grandma, except she's always in the kitchen, or complaining about Sam, and how he never stacks the hay bales quite right, or how he didn't give Ginny enough feed. That damn cow. I think she might like her more than she likes me. While I was sitting, I traced my fingers over the planks of rotting wood beside me, recognizing every crack, every nail out of place from years of wear. I've probably memorized the curve of each warped plank, how they dip and fall in the middle, and then sharply rise at one end. If somebody saw me sitting on the porch, they'd probably think I was waiting for something, the banged up screen door in the foreground, the two thin posts holding up the roof on either side of me, framing me like I'm the goddamn Mona Lisa. I guess I am waiting for something. I'm not quite sure what. Maybe for the neighbors to move out, and get replaced by the next cookie cutter family, maybe for the rest of my life to catch up to me. I just don't think I can keep sitting on the porch much longer. This can't be my life. I swear, some day, I'm gonna get up off of the porch, and leave this town for good.

May 31st  
Flagstaff, Arizona...still

I decided that I can't tell Grandma about my plan. Well, I wouldn't call it a plan. That makes it sound like I'm doing something bad. And I'm not, for the record. I think I just need to find myself. And right now, Flagstaff is sucking every last drop of life out of me. Every day I spend here makes me want to leave more. I used to love sitting out on the porch, or in Grandma's rocker, looking out onto the boundless desert, the sun leaving bright dots of light strobing in and out of my vision, clouds of dust being swept away by daylight. Now, the view just reminds me of how much is out there, how much I haven't seen, the vast plane looking like it could stretch forever. Grandma always knows when I'm lying. She says my nose crinkles at the bridge, and my voice gets all high. I'm not so sure I believe her. Either way, I tried my best to ignore her today. It really wasn't that hard. She spent the day in the house, and I went anywhere but. Grandma probably thinks I'll turn into a raisin from being out in the sun too much before I leave. If she knew I wanted to go, she never in a million years would let me. So, tonight at dinner, I didn't bring it up. The pot pie was good. It would have tasted worse if I had told her.

June 3rd  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Packing is much harder than I expected. I don't know why I thought it would be easy. I mean, I've spent my whole life under the same roof—hell, I almost couldn't find a suitcase. The only one I could find was tucked away between old photo albums and a participation trophy from my glory days in the third grade relay race hidden in the back of Grandma's closet. When I finally wedged the suitcase out of the closet's narrow opening, I realized it was more of a briefcase covered in fuzzy gray dust from decades of sitting undisturbed. It's like someone knew my plan, and did a full sweep of the house to remove any viable piece of luggage. That's the other thing. I don't really have a plan. You could say I'm still ironing out the details, if the 'details' are every step of my preparation. But the suitcase is a start. I wasn't exactly sure what someone should pack when they're leaving home. I mean, I'm sure there's a handbook on it somewhere, but the library is far, and I have too much confidence in my abilities to take someone else's advice. I ended up stuffing as many clothes as I could into the suitcase. I left my ratty old sleep shirts and work pants in the bottom drawer of the dresser Grandpa made for me out of old scrap wood from the shed. I made sure to fold everything neatly, so Grandma knew I didn't leave in a hurry. I had some more room in the suitcase once I'd packed all my clothes, so I scrounged up some pens and paper, along with some envelopes and stamps for writing letters. As a final precaution, I slid my money box out from under my bed, and counted it all before slipping the money into my leather pouch. As I flipped through every wrinkled bill, I let the worn smell percolate, the scent almost like fresh dirt clouded by the fog after a rainstorm. Even though I don't want to admit it, I felt a pang of sadness when I started zipping up my suitcase. It was a small feeling, one that I tried my best to ignore, but just in case, I slipped in Bunny, his droopy ears worn, light blue terry cloth tattered at the seams. Just in case.

June 4th  
Flagstaff, Arizona

"You goin' anywhere special?"

That's what the lady at the tourist center asked me. She said it plainly, very matter of fact, which made me think she really could have cared less. I wonder if they tell you that you have to make small talk with the customer. Maybe they give you a list of short phrases to use when you work at the town center, just in case you don't want to file through magazines and brochures in awkward silence. As an answer, I gave her a quick shrug and a smirk, hoping that was enough for her to turn around, and find me the bus schedules I asked for. I think she got the message, because she didn't say anything else for the rest of the time I was there. I kept my head low, surveying the blue and gray dotted formica counter, lit by aggressive yellow fluorescent light. The two times I heard the door open, its hinges squeaking reluctantly, a rush of hot air piercing the cool room, my whole body went stiff, my jaw tightening as the door's bell rang out cheerfully. The lady at the desk eyed me as she looked up—the first time it was the mailman, and the second time, it was her coworker. I was so paranoid that someone I knew would walk in, and try and ask me questions I didn't know the answer to. And god knows nobody here can keep their mouth shut. If it was somebody I knew, within a week, Grandma would've gotten word of me

hanging around the visitor's center. Of course, nobody who lives in Flagstaff would have a reason to pay a visit to the town center, but I couldn't help but let my mind wander. I do that a lot. With the clouds in the sky, morphing into soft white shapes, and the swirling wood grain dancing on the boards of the front porch, or Grandma's voice when she drones on about gossip exchanged over tall glasses of iced tea at needlepoint club. I can never understand why people find talking about other people's lives so interesting, when they could be building their own—really doing something with it. Flagstaff is meant for people with their hearts set on a cookie-cutter life—a quiet life. It has everything you need, no more, no less. Every Sunday, you go to church. The laundromat, grocery store, and post office are all in a three block radius. There's a big barbecue every Fourth of July, and everyone has fireworks in their basement “just in case”. But I don't want to live a quiet life. Sure, it would be comfortable, but I know I'd feel unsatisfied. I can see it now. All old and gray, withering away at Grandma's house, spending every day in a big rocker, screen door propped open to let my army of cats roam, knowing that I didn't live life loud enough.

June 9th  
Seattle, Washington

God, I wanted to cry when the wheels on the charter bus rolled to a stop. I spent the entire day yesterday riding away from sun, and dust, and something that was never mine. But this felt like mine. The fog that settled on the trees was thick, the kind you just wanted to walk into and never come out of. The branches sagged under its invisible weight, gently bobbing up and down, letting the mid-afternoon air carry them. The cool air enveloped me as I stepped down the dark linoleum stairs of the bus, almost like a faraway welcome. Seattle. Where the smell of pine followed, erasing the smell of Arizona from my clothes. I couldn't stop saying it in my head. Seattle. This is it.

July 14th  
Seattle, Washington

I think this is my favorite place. It's also the only place I've been besides Flagstaff, but that doesn't matter. I like my one room apartment—it's the cheapest one I could find. It's just big enough for me. The appliances it came with have that old charm. A faded green toaster, white oven, its rounded edges melting into a cream color. The walnut cabinets smooth with wear, some shelves slightly slanted. I have two of everything. Two plastic cups, two light blue bowls I found at the Salvation Army, and a drawer full of plastic utensils from all the takeout I've been eating. Specifically Chinese takeout. The first time I went to the restaurant around the corner, I looked at the bright yellow menu tacked above the counter for fifteen minutes. I'd never had Chinese food, stuff that permeated the air with hot steam, and the heavy scent of grease. I ordered pork egg rolls, and veggie lo mein. It was the fastest I've ever eaten anything, even Grandma's cooking. It's safe to say I haven't stopped going since.

July 27th  
Seattle, Washington

When I first got here, I didn't do much. Well, I didn't sit inside all day, but the absence of the blazing hot sun definitely took some getting used to. I took a lot of walks through town, wandering aimlessly through neighborhoods too expensive for me to ever live in. At night, I walked along the waterfront. There was something mesmerizing about the glittering black water, dots of color from city lights swaying along the river's current. I could hear faraway music from the nightclubs, the distant sound rippling through the water's silence. On one of my walks on my way to the waterfront, the alley of neon signs caught my eye. I could hear the thumping bass from where I was standing on the corner, and I decided to visit one of the nightclubs. When I walked into the club, I could feel my toes vibrating, the blood circulating through my veins. The closest I'd ever been to being in a room with this many people was during Sunday brunch in the church basement, and I can tell you that everybody there was sober. On the opposite end of the room, along the far left wall, I spotted the bar, dim lights separating it from the colors strobing in and out around the rest of the room. I elbowed my way through swaths of people like I was at the county fair, until the crowd parted, an open barstool waiting for me. I sat down, trying to remember why I decided to come here in the first place, when I heard someone yelling over the noise. I looked to my right, to see a girl sitting next to me, her face illuminated by the colored lights. Her long, dark hair fell below her shoulders, some strands out of place. Her smile was bright against her other features, muted by the dim lighting. Her eyes were a deep brown, like you could see right into them. Everything about her was effortless. I must have looked confused, because she yelled again.

"Hi!"

I smiled, mainly to be polite. I'm used to people just minding their business. I think I expected her to turn back to her friends, who were in a huddle, slowly drifting onto the dance floor, but she looked straight at me, almost like she was looking through me. And I couldn't look away. She asked me if I wanted a drink, and I gave a half-assed yell over the noise, my throat suddenly too dry to get out a real answer, but she understood it was a yes. She told me her name was Ella. She asked me where I was from, and she said she liked my accent. I didn't think I had one. We talked until the crowd thinned, and the music didn't seem so loud anymore. I didn't get back to my apartment until two a.m., but I couldn't seem to fall asleep—I just felt so alive.

July 30th

Seattle, Washington

Part of me still feels like none of it is real. Like I'm still on Grandma's porch, daydreaming about the places I'll never see, the people I'll never meet. But it's all real. I had the best day yesterday. The day was soft, the sun barely peeking through the clouds, illuminating shadows with warm puddles of light. Ella and I had a picnic in Gas Works Parks that sat on top of a hill overlooking the city. I thought having a picnic was something only storybook characters did, but Ella insisted that we do it. Last week, we went to one of her favorite stores to pick out a set of napkins and silverware that I put in one of my empty kitchen drawers for when she comes over. We ate cheese and crackers, and every other pretentious food combination you could think of. It was great. When I got home, I checked the small black mailbox in the vestibule with my apartment number pasted on it, just out of habit. As my fingers fumbled around the cool metal sides, I felt a

letter. I pulled out a small, square envelope, its four corners crisp. On the front was my name, scrawled out in penmanship I'd recognize anywhere. It was Grandma. She wanted me home.