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Over the River, Through the Woods

I guess we took a wrong turn, I thought aboard my all-day coach to Brussels. The entirety of my experience proved to be surreal, but as the coach crossed the English Channel and rolled off the ferry in the French town of Calais, my otherwise jovial trip took a turn, literally, for the worst.

The next time I looked out the window, I was confronted with a sheer wall, higher than I could see over and longer than I could see past. Scarcely two months past the October attacks on Paris, I was almost reassured; thus far, I was fairly underwhelmed by the French border control, and, to me, the wall looked like safety. A few minutes later, looking up again, that wall of safety gave way to living carnage spread out on both sides of the road.

I had vague knowledge of a refugee camp in Calais, but I had no real idea what that meant. This muddy mass of makeshift tents straddling the highway could not be a refugee camp—and it wasn't. As I learned soon after, "The Jungle" as the campsite in Calais was colloquially known, was a squatter town. They were very much on their own; the French would not take responsibility for them, nor the British, nor the United Nation. Only a few months after I encountered the settlement, it was bulldozed.

I was scared.

There were lots of men, and the masses in the camp and standing along the road were groups much larger than the coach. But as I watched them, I realized how weak they all looked. They were barefoot, sinking inches deep into the mud of the rainy, humid climate. Though the temperature was bearable for me in a climate controlled coach, they wore rags, many in only shorts. The women and children wore wraps of fabric turned into skirts, dragging and wet in the same mud. A woman with an infant sat in a single spot of sunlight, both wrapped in construction plastic.

I was horrified.

People lived lavishly in the London suburbs that surrounded me—immediately across the channel these people starved. The huge wall that had earlier signaled safety to me, barred vision of the British shore across the channel, where many were hoping to find refuge.

The people on either side looked up as the coach passed, some opened their mouths, calling out, but I couldn't hear what they said. I opened my mouth, too, gaping.

I was helpless.

“Study abroad,” my peers urged, “it's such an empowering experience.” They weren't wrong, but in that moment, with well over a mile of absolute destitution around me, I felt small. I felt incapable, and weak, and powerless. The ability to catch a flight to a slew of foreign countries on the weekends was completely overshadowed by my absolute inability to help these people.

I was angry.

How could this happen? I was on the border of two of the most modern nations in the world, England and France, yet people starved in the mud of their backyard. The response? A £12 million wall to shield the rest of society. I had volunteered at my fair share of homeless shelters in my home city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; I had felt the pang of sympathy when I drove past the huts made under big-city bridges. This was a different beast entirely.

I was in disbelief.

These are people, I reminded myself again. Even as I repeated it, engraving it into my brain so as not to forget again, my mind shunned the thought. *This is not possible*, it said. And through that thought I realized the absolute necessity of these uncomfortable realities in my life. These people, this place, was a reality I was spared by a lucky birthright. I was, through no merit of my own, born to a middle-class American family. Others were not so lucky, and the sheer thought that the thousands in The Jungle and millions elsewhere could be so unfortunate made my heart skip.

The glamorized vision of travel is often accurate for those lucky enough to enjoy it. But these people, they were travelers of an entirely different breed. Real-life nomads who had traversed entire countries by means much less glorious than the coach I rode to Brussels. It

pained me to look at them, not because the picture was so repugnant, but because it so starkly reminded me of my own privilege, my own lack of experience, and my own negligence of their plight.

In many ways, this was the most significant experience of my trip abroad. Though I was humbled by the cultures I had seen and people I had experienced, there was nothing quite as potent as the sight I saw driving through The Jungle. I studied political science, debated policies, and followed the news, but never had I been so directly confronted with the ramifications of those subjects. I remembered that these were *people*, and with horror I realized that in the midst of the analysis, the opinions, and the news, I had forgot the most basic component of the equation.

Since then, I make a point to confront such uncomfortable realities head-on. I make a point to understand, as comprehensively as I can, the struggles of those less fortunate than I am. My complacency in my own situation and my pity of others worse off has ceased to suffice as a tithe to compensate for my privilege.

Luck, destiny, supernatural being, what have you, was the only thing separating my life from the life of those in The Jungle. Though I selfishly felt unbelievably relieved to lead the life I have lead, I somehow felt responsible for those whose universe had not been so generous.

No longer were they the dangerous “other” described in the newsy, or the scary mass my coach drove by, they were simply people that I, like so many others in the world, had driven past.