

On Mileage

I was born in the water. My mother called it an effortless passage of life, relatively quick and uncomplicated, and Doctor Naftalin's son waited outside in muddy boots on a rainy afternoon. We lived in the northwestern corner of London, where bare autumn trees framed long rows of white Victorian terraces that wrapped around communal gardens. The bunker in the center sprouted crocuses in the spring and there were rod iron gates at the southernmost edge where we would run to meet my father on the evenings he'd come home. They met twelve years earlier while he was covering the Falklands War from Argentina. My mother had been walking to class, cool and distant.

. . .

Distance can be defined as the amount of space between two things or people, remoteness, an interval of time. It is a scalar quantity. Distance cannot be negative. Distance travelled never decreases. Displacement is the change in an object's position from the origin. Displacement is a vector quantity. Displacement has both magnitude and direction. Displacement can be determined by subtracting the object's initial position from its final position. Displacement is always relative.

. . .

Once, when we were still living in Maida Vale, in that large bright apartment with white linen curtains that billowed in the breeze, someone decided to take a picture of them. They are perched like two birds in a canoe. Daylight is reflecting off the water behind them. Weeping willows line the edge of Regent's Canal from the background, and, even if the air was dry and still, the branches must have swayed. She is wearing a striped dress. Only his head and neck and shoulder are in the frame. The rest I can imagine: a thin chest with sparse hair, thinner legs poking out of swim trunks, one ankle resting on the other knee, as it always has, mostly in the early mornings with a newspaper between his thumb and index finger, and a coffee, milky but not sweet, on the arm of his rocker.

. . .

The day before my cousin died I drove upstate to Lily Dale with the women on my father's side of the family. Three generations piled into the backseat of my grandmother's Camry and we stopped for take-out at Cassadaga's only Chinese restaurant, just off Route 60.

Lily Dale is a hamlet about an hour southwest of Buffalo, New York. Constituted in 1879, it remains one of the few Spiritualist communities to resist withering away. It was the middle of summer. The air conditioning tasted stale and my thighs stuck to the leather. Public demonstrations of Mediumship were included in our gate ticket and held at the Forest Temple where seemingly average people called the deceased, as if to use a rotary phone, and we listened, patiently, while strangers told strangers things unsaid.

He is saying how much of a rainbow you are. There are rainbows bursting out of you. She used her whole hand to point at me and relay messages from the half-dead. You're encouraged to look at different things with an open curiosity. You will sense him keep going. He will say no, not today.

Later that week, my father and I waited outside of the airport in Buenos Aires while night seeped into morning and the dew of a mild winter settled on parked cars. I was angry because I felt jealous and I knew that's not what I was supposed to feel.

We had missed the funeral by a day and no one told me about how all of the cousins passed a joint around his headstone. Instead they would toss me his jar of shake as if Tomás had left it for me and I'd smoke it on his balcony, imagining my bones as ash at the bottom of an urn.

I kicked an empty bottle around the sidewalk and tried not to be selfish. It was almost day and the city still slept. My father leaned against the wall and scratched the back of his head. He said nothing, just looked at the crown of my head and half-smiled. I wondered what it must be like to watch a life from beginning to end. The flight left me groggy and bitter and pensive and resentful and my cheeks were still flushed when I tiptoed around the grave that afternoon, so as not to step on his delicate body, palpable underneath the balding earth.

. . .

It was the fourteenth anniversary of the fall of the Twin Towers and also what should have been his twenty-third birthday. The landing woke me up dry-mouthed while people behind me cheered. Someone in a suit holding a Harrods bag helped me with my carry-on and I stumbled out of Heathrow into the wet wind. My two large suitcases filled with superfluous things bounced around me in the backseat and when I watched the city stream by through the window, it felt like I was seeing it through someone else's eyes. I tried to say something correct and concise when the driver asked where I'm from. In the following months I would devise a sort of script in which I'd throw my head back and laugh as if it were organic and not rehearsed. *That's, like, a loaded question—define 'from!'* I'd grin and take a sip.

. . .

The Saturday after New Year's I used a few dozen plastic shopping bags to move into my new flat and someone held the door for me on the way up who I thanked profusely but never saw again. The building occupied an entire street in southeast London. Its entrance was at the corner of a small and idle intersection and Borough Market was only a six minutes' walk away. The room came with enough storage to hide my things. Above the desk was a bulletin board on which I hung the front page of that morning's Evening Standard. *Rock icon dies at 69 after secret battle with cancer* it read. The sun set before it ever really broke opaque gray sky. It hadn't rained in a few hours but the streets still sounded wet and when I stepped outside of the tube station everyone was already crowded around the mural singing Life on Mars. *Our Brixton Boy* was posted on the marquee outside The Ritzy. *R.I.P.*

. . .

I'm a liar, I said to a friend of a friend of my ex while our legs tangled together under my sheets. We talked with our eyes on the last night of January and in the morning I told him all of my secrets. He made my bed and I made him breakfast but I burnt the onions and he pretended not to notice. When we sat next to each other on the train, shoulders and knees kissing with every turn of the tracks, I watched him listen to me think. We held hands for the week.

. . .

When I returned to the States at the end of July, I shoved the dwindling contents of my life into a hard shell suitcase. My parents had just finished furnishing their new home with treasures found in flea markets and prints I'd made my first year of university. We brought all our kitchenware and tablecloths and built a coffee table out of two birdhouses and a barn door. My mother hung up curtains that let the light in, that let the house breathe. She helped me put away my clothes and arrange the room but when I woke up there the next morning, it felt like someone else's bed.

. . .

I am shucking pistachios in the passenger's seat and counting the number of miles it will take before he doubts our compatibility too. The odometer clocks a few hundred, but we have only covered a fraction of the journey. We are driving back to New York, a friend of a friend of my ex and I. He departed from Los Angeles in a silver station wagon a week ago and I flew to Denver to meet him halfway. He runs his fingers through his hair and I trace mine along I-70 in the atlas his mother left on the dashboard before he kissed her goodbye, one thousand and sixteen miles ago. From Colorado through Kansas we are silent.

The cornfields outside the window are unchanging. Colors of earth blur into each other and we are moving too fast, too far to pull them apart. By the time we reach Memphis rain is pelting the windshield and I wonder if we are going to die in some tragic accident before ever reaching home. He laughs when I say this out loud and I think it's sweet, buoyant, charming. We watch the sky darken almost instantly.