"This is so tragic," Matt mutters as he strains to pick the sticks and seeds out of the remnants of the quarter of pot that he left stashed in the van. Somehow, he and Stacy have made a bong out of an old wax milkcarton, the kind that always reminds me of lunches at elementary school. From my position sprawled out on the thin and dirty mattress that covers the backseat, I consider shifting my head to examine their handiwork, but give up once I realize that any slight movement would cause me to lose the comfortable spot. It took me forever to stretch myself out in the back of the van so that Mark and I could both see out the window at the countryside around us. We lay on the mattress, like players on Sesame Street awkwardly forming the letter "T" with our bodies. My chin rests comfortably on Mark's giant chest, a gesture which, although I'm sure surprised him, he politely made no mention of.

After all, Mark and I usually don't touch. When you choose to be close friends with a member of the opposite sex, there's always that awkward middle territory that you don't want to breach. Touching like this is usually part of the taboo area. But for some reason, tonight it was all right. It was even comfortable.

I could feel his breathing through my whole body. As he inhaled and exhaled, my head bobbed up and down with his movement. His thin cotton T-shirt smelled like fabric softener, and a peculiar sour, sweaty skin scent that I believe to be exclusive to men. It was a smell that reminded me of my father, in an unpleasant way. It ruined the rare, quiet mood that had settled over me.
Irritated for no particular reason, I flick Mark's nipple with my thumb and forefinger, causing it to immediately harden.

"Quit it!" Mark squirms away from me, cupping his nipples protectively with his hands.

"Oh, come on. You know you want it."
"I feel so . . . violated," he teases.
I begin to inch away from him, but change my mind at the last minute.
"Let me feel them," I demanded, crawling into a sitting position on top of his legs.
"No way!" Mark smiles, and in some unspoken way, I know that he is giving his permission. I feel his chest through his shirt, warm and hairy, and can see the little buttons of his nipples poking against the fabric of his shirt.
"Why do you like that so much?"
Mark is truly puzzled by this. Actually, so am I. I know it's not a sexual thing, this exploration of his body. And we both know in that unfair, gender-specific way that he would never be allowed to ask the same of me. This is just a quirk of mine. A strange nipple fascination that only he knows about.

Secrets, though, are our specialty.
"I watched Stewart today," Mark whispers when he is sure that Matt and Stacy aren't listening from the front seat.
Laughing, I roll away from him.
"You're such a voyeur."
"It's a sickness," he sighs. "Kill me."

"It is never really freedon until you find something you really positively want to be."
--D.H. Lawrence

Every night this summer was just the same. Hop into the van, watch Matt and Stacy smoke whatever they could get their hands on, and drive around looking for fireflies. But even though it was so comfortable, spending every night in a beat up old Dodge van still made me feel restless, as if there was
maybe some more constructive way I could be wasting my time. Of course, Mark filled the void through watching his neighbors. He liked to spy. It made him feel more . . . involved. Besides, in the middle of the summer, what else was there to do?

Mark's recent endeavors into the world of voyeurism had evolved out of the use of a high power telescope that Stacy had set up in the living room to watch the phases of the moon.

This telescope, Mark often professed, was the only bonus of having Matt and Stacy move into his family's basement. I wasn't so sure, but then again, living in the same house with those two would probably be quite a different experience from just riding around with them in their van.

For the sake of the family tree, let me point out that Matt is Mark's older brother. It was almost two years ago when Matt decided that he was finally tired of just sitting around his parent's house. He and his girlfriend Stacy secretly pooled together all of their money, bought a beat-up Dodge van, pasted a "Kill Your Television" sticker on the back window, and lit out in the middle of the night for the desert. For a day or so, his parents didn't really notice he was missing. Over meals they would casually ask if anyone had seen Matt lately, or if anyone knew what had happened to the blender. No one realized they had actually moved out until Matt called his family from a pay phone outside of Louisiana.

"Mom, Stacy and I are going to live in the desert now."
"The where?"
"The desert. We just need to get away from every thing."
"That's nice. By the way, have you seen dad's blender?"

With Matt gone, things certainly were quiet around Mark's house. I used to think that everybody was better off with those gone. When they came back two months later, I realized that I was probably just jealous. I've never liked facing people who are having more fun than me.

**TAKING FLIGHT**

The stewardesses occasionally turn around and purposely avoid looking me in the eye. They glance
directly over my head, as if they are looking for someone important. Someone who obviously isn't me. This is their game. They know that I'm trying to get their attention, and want to see how far I'll go in flagging them down.

"Jesus Christ. All I want is another bloody mary," I mutter to no one in particular.

Giving up, I sink back into my seat. I'm edgy because I know I'm going to have to face the trans-Atlantic flight without a sufficient amount of cheap vodka to numb my system. After all, I'm still a college student. I know my rights.

The old man across the aisle from me fidgets in his seat, trying to cock the recliner's angle at a reasonable degree between 90 and 95. He looks like an aging golf pro, dressed to the nines in kelly green trousers, a pink and mint striped polo shirt, and gleaming white belt. I try my best not to stare, but the look on his face draws me to him. He looks confused, maybe even a bit frustrated. The furrow between his bushy white eyebrows deepens as he motions for a stewardess to come over. I am of course instantly irritated at how little effort it takes for him to get a response.

"Yes?" asks a brisk woman with her hair in a tight french roll. Her name tag reads, "LaVrelle." I've never heard that name before, but I instantly decide that it's perfect for her.

The man leans over to LaVrelle. "Where are we?"

"On the runway, preparing to taxi."

"Yes, yes," he waves his hand impatiently in the air. "But where are we? Is this Newark?"

"Sir, we're in Indianapolis. Continental Airlines flight 317 to London."

LaVrelle pretends that she sees another passenger waving to her, and walks away without another word. I settle back into my seat and try not to look at the old man across the aisle who has gone back to fidgeting with his seat. From behind me, I hear the voice of a little girl excitedly talking to her mother.

"Wow, Mommy. This plane looks like the ocean!"

The mother chuckles, and for the life of me I can't understand what the girl could possibly mean. Through her eyes, the world is obviously a very different place.
A moment of silence passes. The engines of the plane begin to kick in, cutting through the air with a peculiar high-pitched wheeze. I can hear the girl behind me snap open the plastic cover on her window.

"You know, Mommy, I think I'll grow up a little while I'm in England."

•••••

"Others chuck it all for beatnik crosscountry odysseys, or hide within the safe confines of academia, taking up to eight years to earn a bachelor's degree."

--Paul Rogers
"Talking About Their Generation"

Mark once told me that it was his dream to backpack across Europe, getting laid by captivating, exotic strangers in each country he passed through. I admit, that whole scene doesn't sound too bad to me. Given the chance, though, I know I wouldn't be able to go through with the sex. I think I sat through one too many high school "sex=disease and death" convocations to fully enjoy any such bohemian recklessness.

But with my time in college quickly screeching to a halt, I figured that the summer before my senior year would be my last chance to have a crack at adventure before I had to face the real world. So I decided just to do it. A few weeks in London. What could be better? Besides the captivating strangers, that is.

I always thought that something like this would change my life. Give me direction, broaden my horizons, and all that. I feel so trapped by Life. I know I'm supposed to find a way to grow up. That's what a college graduate is supposed to do, right? But I don't know how. I must have been absent they day they passed out the flow charts with the box "Adulthood" cubed off at the end.

I'm not totally unmotivated, though. I went to the Career Services center right before my summer odyssey to London. A chipmunk-cheeked woman named Amy squinted at me from behind her desk, which was cocked at an odd angle as not to make me feel intimidated (I learned that in psychology class). She demanded to see my resume, and I panicked when I realized that I had no idea what skills I had to market, let alone how to summarize them in a neat little package.
The Awakening, Washington, D. C.
Photo by Nick Murphy
Pushing her pencil cup to the side of her desk blotter, Amy looked me in the eye and said, "You know what you need to start to do?"

I shook my head, feeling inexplicably guilty.
"Network, network, network!"

Needless to say, I escaped as quickly as possible. That was also the day I decided to go to London.

**PARTYING WITH A DEATHWISH**

On the street outside the pub, Smudge casually brushes his fingers against the bare skin of my arm. It doesn't take too much ingenuity to figure out he did it on purpose, and I have to bite my lower lip to keep from smiling. Across the water from us, there's a party going on at the Stratford boathouse. The green, blue, and red lights hanging on its patio leak their reflections on the river Avon like color spills from a paintbrush dipped in a Dixie cup.

Mesmerized by the colors on the water, I barely feel Smudge work his fingers slowly between mine. I don't think I would have even noticed, except for the temperature of his hands. They're cold. Too cold to hold comfortably, but I'm not about to give up my grip on him.

As we walk over the long, concrete bridge that will take us to the side of the river where my hotel is, Smudge slowly begins to trace the curve of my fingernails with his index finger. Now that the effects of the rum and cokes he bought me are starting to wear off, I don't know quite what to say to him. I don't feel nearly as witty or clever as I did back at the Rose and Crown Pub. For some reason, everything that starts to come out of my mouth sounds stupid. I want desperately to be able to say something profound to him. Something that will forever shape his opinion of American women.

"Boy, it's cold out here, isn't it?" As soon as the sentence comes out of my mouth, it hangs heavily in the air. I want to take it back, start over. But since that's impossible, I clench my teeth and keep walking.
"It's late," he says. "And it gets colder here at night than anywhere else. You know that."

I smile at Smudge and nod my head knowingly, even though it's only my second night in England and I don't have a clue what he's talking about. It's a relatively good bluff, though, and he doesn't seem to notice.

When we reach the center of the bridge, he tugs my hand and leads me over to the edge. In one swift motion, he hops up onto the railing and situates himself so that I can stand in the open space between his legs. Moving forward, I rest my hands on his knees and look up at him. I try my hardest to catch a glimpse of the color of his eyes, but the shadows from the trees fall too heavily on his face. He studies me quietly. I've never liked silence much. It unnerves me. I wonder what he's concentrating on, what he's thinking, but then the reality of what I'm doing suddenly hits me. This man is a complete stranger. I let him pick me up in a pub partly because I liked his English accent, and partly because I knew it would make a good story to take back to Mark, Matt, and Stacy.

"Move a bit closer, would you, Love?" he said.

Passively, I oblige. I justify it by rationalizing that no American girl in her right mind could resist the wishes of a British man who called her "Love." When was I going to get a chance like this again? I know that I'd be having a much better time if I could just stop thinking so damn much. Unfortunately, I'm cursed with the knowledge that I'm just romanticizing the situation. I mean, really, how much can I care about a guy I know I'll never see again?

Then again, what do emotions have to do with anything? It's hard enough to find someone to connect with on a purely physical level. Besides, I'm not particularly disappointed by the situation. For the moment, I can't imagine anywhere else I'd rather be. The only thought I have room for now, anyway, is whether or not he's going to lean down far enough so I can kiss him.

Taking a deep breath, I touch his cheek and hope for the best.