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The Study Abroad Effect: A Psychological Examination of Love and Friendship During Extraordinary Experiences

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THE STUDY ABROAD EFFECT:

A psychological examination of love and friendship during extraordinary experiences

A thesis submitted to

Regis College

The Honors Program

in partial fulfillment for the requirements

for Graduation with Honors

by

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Director, Regis College Honors Program

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first people that need to be acknowledged are my two very best friends, Claire and Dar. They are the driving forces behind nearly everything I do and in everything I love. I wrote this thesis for them, and for us. Their unwavering support carried me through this difficult process and meeting them changed me for the better. This thesis was nothing short of a labor of love. Even more support came in the form of Dr. Narcisi. This thesis would simply not exist without her help. Through tears, complaints, and setbacks, she guided me with only the utmost love, care, and respect for my whole being. She understood from the very, very beginning just how much this story meant to me and never once dissuaded me from this path. In addition, Professor Knorr was hugely impactful in this journey as well. Creative writing is truly an art form, and it is a skill that must be fostered. Because of Professor Knorr, I was able to do this. I wish I could put into words what being taught by her has meant to me, but all I can really say is, “thank you.” Furthermore, Dr. McCall, with her open-door policy and our shared love of drinking way too much coffee, inspired me to embrace the more scientific side of my story. Speaking of my amazing professors, without the help of Dr. Maniscalco, Dr. Fricks-Gleason, Dr. Betjemann, and Sherri Montagne I would not have been able to go on my study abroad in the first place. They advocated for me when no one else would. I owe them everything.

My mom and dad instilled in me a love of storytelling from a young age. Their love has always been a guiding force in my life, and it inspires me daily. My love of love is because of them. It is a cornerstone in my life, something I know will always be there. My friend Laura deserves more credit than anyone else. She was stuck with me in a dorm room while I experienced the ups and downs of my grief related to study abroad ending. She listened, and listened, and listened even more

for over a year about this thesis. My great friends Chi and Erin did too. They are the biggest supporters of this work, and I will be forever grateful for them.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Dr. Schreier, the entire honors program, and my dear honors classmates. Dr. Schreier, Dr. Narcisi, Dr. Palmer, and Dr. Bowie saw us all at our worst: fall semester of senior year, the impending doom of graduation heavy on our minds, *and* in the midst of writing these theses. Yet, they never once turned their backs on us. The one bright light in all of that chaos was that we got to do it alongside one another. The one constant in my entire college career has been these honors kids. We all met that very day of freshman year and watching them grow and growing alongside of them has been one of the greatest joys of my life. I feel lucky to have known them through this harrowing stage of our lives, and even luckier to love them. The honors program will always hold a special place in my heart. To Lauren and Ingrid, my fellow memoirists, we did it!

Thank you (finally) to Glasgow, but I think that goes without saying.

ABSTRACT

Name: Emma Barnes

Major: Psychology

The Study Abroad Effect: A Psychological Examination of Love and Friendship During Extraordinary Experiences

Advisor's Name: Lara Narcisi Ph.D.

Seventy-five percent of people in the Peace Corps fall in love. College students go on Semester at Sea and come back calling it “the love boat.” Mormon missionaries meet their soulmates. The list goes on and on. Why are people going on these excursions and forming such intense bonds? And what do all of them even have in common? Well, they all fall under the category of “extraordinary experiences,” according to the criterion of intensity, engagement, and temporality. During experiences such as these, dopamine levels in the brain spike significantly. After a while, our brains become hardwired by the mundane and repetitive nature of everyday life. Extraordinary experiences legitimately rewire our brains, and we love it. With dopamine flowing through our veins, relearning awe and wonder, and that rewiring, it is not hard to believe that we can often mistake all of this arousal in our bodies for attraction. I know this is true because there is science to corroborate it, yes, but I also know because I experienced it first-hand. My central argument came naturally because of this: people fall in love easier during extraordinary experiences.

DISCLAIMER

This thesis is a work of creative non-fiction, based on real-life events that happened during my time abroad at the University of Glasgow in the fall of 2022. I kept a detailed journal while I was there, as did my friends. Names have been changed in order to protect the identities of the people involved. Verbal consent from participating parties has been obtained. The piece you will read is a “braided essay,” with four separate stories woven together: girlhood, love?, proof, and growing up in Glasgow. They will each come in and out as the story progresses, but the overall message of all four is the same: why do people fall in love and make friends more easily during extraordinary experiences?

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes I wish my parents weren't in love.

It's not that I don't want them to love each other, because really, I do. I just think that it puts all this pressure on me to find my love match too. I acknowledge that I am one of the lucky ones to have parents who actually enjoy one another's company, but it has also turned me into a lovesick 21-year-old with no end in sight. In recent years, maybe since I was 14, I have clung to the idea of a "one true love." For a while, it drove many of my relationships. I would fall so deeply and utterly "in love" with these horribly average men who probably couldn't stand me anyways, and the only thing that has ever been able to make me realize this is time.

I love love. It motivates everything I do. With that said, love is a mysterious thing to me. I have loved my entire life, and yet, it is all still so new to me. Despite this, I know enough to know that I have experienced great love, both platonic and romantic. I've fallen in love on large and small scales. I have fallen in love with people and with places, and eventually, I learned how to fall in love with myself.

I learned a lot of these love lessons while studying abroad. The life I lived while abroad was unlike anything I had ever known. While the feelings I was experiencing the entire time seemed to be exacerbated, life was slower, more meaningful. The people I met changed me and leaving this life I had created for myself left a hole in my heart that I am still trying to figure out how to fill.

Such influential experiences do not happen to everyone, nor do they happen often. There is something about study abroad and extraordinary experiences in general that makes it easier to form such intense bonds in a short amount of time. Why does this happen? How does this happen? This is something that has puzzled me for a long time. At my high school, there was a mission trip that everyone wanted to go on in Guatemala. This wasn't an easy trip. They lived in dirt huts, slept on

the floor, and spent 16 hours a day digging holes for access to clean water for the people. I mean, why would a teenage girl want to do that? I'll tell you why: boys. The trip was infamous for match making. People fell in love, and these 17-year-olds came back practically engaged. Some lasted and some didn't, but something was happening in Guatemala on that mission trip to cause people to fall in love. I had forgotten all about this, I never went to Guatemala, and soon, I moved on from this perplexing phenomenon. Until, of course, I experienced it first-hand. Or at least, I thought I did.

Extraordinary experiences such as study abroad impact people to their very core. I hypothesize that when we are moved to be so open in this way, we become more open to change, and in turn, we open up to people more easily. When we allow ourselves this privilege of opening up in this way, experiences mean more. There are chemicals in our bodies and in our brains that make this possible. This is a beautifully human ability. When I studied abroad, I had no idea this would happen to me. So, I set off on a quest to find out why.

CHAPTER ONE: SEPTEMBER 2022

Girlhood

“No, no thanks I think I’m good,” I say to the kind Scottish man sitting in the Cairncross lobby offering to help me carry my bags.

At this point, I have endured a nearly nine-hour flight from Denver, a seven-hour time change, a horrible customs officer, a four-hour layover in London-Heathrow, a one and half hour flight from LHR, a dysfunctional baggage carousel, and an excruciatingly silent taxi ride. The last thing I wanted to do was to have to make small talk late at night with this Scottish security guard. I began lugging my bags from Cairncross to the flats right across the street.

“Kelvinhaugh Street,” I read out loud, stumbling over the syllables. “This must be it.” And with that, there I was, all alone in a foreign city, standing in front of where I was to call home for the next three and half months. But this was it, I reminded myself. This was everything I had worked so incredibly hard for. Glasgow.

I swiped my key-fob and an ear splitting “eeeeee” sound came from the intercom, signaling my entrance. I looked around and quickly came to the realization that there was no elevator. I remember audibly gasping and seriously considering just leaving it all there at the bottom of the stairs, too emotionally and physically exhausted to bother. My bag exceeded the fifty-pound limit, and there was simply no way I was going to be able to lug all my bags up to Flat H on the very top floor. I barely exceeded 110 pounds. As I pondered my newfound (and unexpected) conundrum, I could feel my eyes starting to fill with tears.

“Do you need some help?” The sudden low voice made me jump. I turned around to see two smiling faces, a man and woman, both American.

“Really? Would you guys mind?” I responded, having to internally check my anxiety over the reality of asking strangers to help me manhandle my suitcases up to the top floor. They look at each other, probably regretting the offer upon being informed that I did in fact live all the way up in Flat H.

“Not at all!” The man goes to grab my big, brown luggage. He let out an exasperated sigh, looked at me, then motioned to his friend to help him. The man and the woman each grabbed an end, and I picked up my small pink suitcase. We began the ascent. They had to take breaks between nearly every flight.

Eventually, we reached my door. I thanked them profusely and they said it was no problem. I think about this act of kindness often. It was probably their first night too. They were scared, stressed, and yet, they chose to help out a complete stranger. I never did learn their names, nor did I ever see them again, but I am eternally grateful for their tenderness that very first night. If it wasn’t for them, I would have spent all night trying to get my stuff up those stairs.

I switched on the light, illuminating the two skinny hallways in front of me. The flat was arranged in a sort of L shape. When you first walked in, you were staring down a short hallway where there are two closets, the bathroom, and the shower room. To your right is the longer hallway with the five rooms and a door at the very end, which I eventually discovered led to the kitchen and living room. The doors each had numbers on them, and I was number 1. It’s cute, I thought. A little bed with navy blue sheets, a big wooden desk with a spinny chair (awesome), a teensy closet, and a skinny window placed just to the right of the bed. I didn’t quite know it yet, but this was about to become my favorite place in the entire world.

My friends and I were in Glasgow for *ten full days* before school began. From September 9th to September 19th, we were ratting the streets, getting to know the city, and really, getting to know one another. The first person I met was Cath.

After my arrival, I texted my friend from my home university to see if she wanted to grab dinner. She responded quickly and asked if her flat mate, Cath from Minnesota, could come. I was on top of the world walking down that street for the very first time. Severely jetlagged? Most definitely. However, food was motivating me, so I powered through and sat down for pizza with Cath. She had piercing blue eyes that she had stunning control over. They would widen and slim in ways that severely stressed me out in the beginning. She had this wild, curly brown hair, pale skin, and a wide smile that she was selective in using.

Immediately, Cath annoyed me. She was doing this weird motion with her hands that was paired with this almost kissy face look that begged an explanation. I felt she was a know it all, but mostly, I found her just exceedingly pretentious. This odd interaction with Cath was overshadowed by the fact that I could now drink legally! I ordered an Aperol spritz and was very pleased with my new-found freedom. The Venice Film Festival had just happened, so everyone was buzzing about the alleged drama between Harry Styles and Chris Pine. Cath and I settled on this being our common ground as we explained it to our other friend. The rest of the conversation was unmemorable. We ate some pizza then went home. In that moment, I had decided I never wanted to see Cath again. Whether it was fate or not, it looked like I was not going to escape her any time soon.

Love?

“I don’t really have a type,” a friend said to Cath’s awkward question.

“Yeah, I don’t really either, just personalities I get along with,” another girl chimed in.

“Oh, I definitely do,” and with this comment, Cath’s real motivations in asking are revealed. She just wanted to spiel about her girlfriend.

“mmHmhm, I would say I do,” I said after Cath was finally done running her mouth.

“What is it, Emma?”

As I began to answer, a boy walked in. He had dark brown hair that almost looked black in the harsh fluorescent lights of the Cairncross common room. He was tall, kind of lanky, and when he walked his toes pointed outward, almost like his legs and feet were too long for him to have complete control over. His chocolate brown eyes matched his hair almost perfectly and his lips were so red that I figured they must be very chapped. He was wearing this purple sweatshirt that made him look like he had been in the sun recently. I suddenly became hyper aware of what I was wearing. It had been raining that night, so I had on my bright yellow rain jacket. I looked like that idiot kid from *It*. His friend must have said something funny because when my eyes caught his he had the biggest, cheesiest smile on his face. It was contagious, and I quickly found myself smiling at nothing at all.

Before I even really notice I’m doing it, Cath turned to me and said, “uhh what are you staring at?”

“Him.”

“What?” all the girls said simultaneously.

“Him, he’s my type. The perfect example actually.”

“We should go talk to him, come on!” Cath goes to grab my hand, but I quickly pulled away.

There was a split second where we made eye contact again. Suddenly, he was walking over to our little group.

“Hi, I’m Emma.”

“Hi, I’m Henry.”

We stood in a circle talking about nothing. Slowly, some friends we had met the previous night join us, recognizing Henry and his roommate from their shared kitchen. To be completely honest, I have no idea what we talked about. I just remember being enthralled by Henry. He stood across from me in the big circle and it was immediately obvious that we were both trying to catch each other’s eyes. Something was going to happen, and everyone knew it. I had this feeling in my stomach, and if I think hard enough, back to that night, I can feel it again. It almost felt like something was tugging me towards him.

Eventually, the room became extremely stale and hot, so we decided to migrate to a pub down the road. There was dark green wallpaper covering all the walls and this intense mood lighting covering the place in shadows. It was still raining out, so Henry walked in and had to shake off the stray drops from his hair. I was standing so close to him that a few of the raindrops hit my sweater. He turned, apologized, smiled, and then followed me over to the table.

By the time we left the pub, it was pouring rain. Henry and his roommate wanted to see our flats, and I obliged. After, I asked to see their room. We trotted across the street, and I walked through the narrow hallways for the first time down to section 13. One right turn at the blue wall, straight for ten doors, down the three steps, and a left turn. Room 132. They were on the first floor and their window looked out onto the street, where wild eighteen-year-olds would soon keep them up. Much to my chagrin, Henry didn’t offer to walk me home, but his roommate did. I asked the roommate if he wanted to smoke outside of my flat.

“So what do you know about him?”

“Well, he’s from Virginia, but lives in Boston. He goes to Duke. That’s about it.”

“Cool. Cool. Boston is my favorite city in all of the United States.”

About 90 seconds of silence passed.

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend I don’t think.”

“Oh. Really? Cool.” I smiled at him and asked some random question as I relished this new revelation.

His roommate went home that night and Henry asked what my name was.

...

Two days later, we were seated in a crowded pub called the Grove, all playing various games over and over again before we were eventually told we had overstayed our welcome. When the Grove closed, we migrated to my flat. There was about a 2 foot-wide balcony that protruded from the living room windows. These windows were not meant to be opened. Henry’s roommate thought it his civic duty to manipulate these windows to allow us to access the balcony to smoke. Suddenly squished like sardines, we made small talk as the nicotine filled our heads. After about 90 minutes of this purgatory, everyone left the balcony except me and Henry. Finally able to sit down, I dangled my ever-so-reliable pink and white converses off the fifth-floor balcony. We talked and talked and talked. I was recently told I was “a talker” by a man I barely know. Immediately, I was transported back to this moment. It was inexplicably exciting to talk to Henry because I was telling him stories that I have probably told a hundred times before, but the way that he would engage with the story, act, and react made it feel like he was the only person in the entire world that I had ever told. It was growing colder by the minute, and dressed inappropriately for the weather, Henry complained. We wriggled through the tampered with windows as I looked at the clock. 3 am.

“I want to go to angel and devil night at the Garage this weekend,” I say, hoping he’ll invite himself.

“You should! I’m actually going to the Isle of Skye this weekend. We leave tomorrow. It’s part of my program with Duke.”

“Oh my goodness, I’m so jealous. That’s the place I really need to go. I have this book on Scotland and everyone says it’s the most beautiful area in all of the UK.”

“Wait, I wanna see it.”

My eyes grew large as I scurried to my room to grab the book. I plopped down on the sofa, and we flipped through the pages.

“So, how’s your Scottish accent?” he asks.

I laugh before responding, “Not good at all.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he utters in the worst Scottish accent known to man.

I look over at him and chuckle. He meets my eyes and I wonder if he can hear my heart beating. I surely can. I woke up the next morning to a shared photo album entitled “Emma Goes To Skye Virtually.”

Proof

There is research on why people fall in love more easily while travelling or experiencing new or scary things. My favorite example of this “love science” is a study done by Drs. Aron and Dutton. They had a group of men suspended on a rickety, unstable bridge and a group of men on a lower, more stable bridge. After each man walked off either bridge, they were approached by a woman offering her phone number and name. The men on the scarier bridge were always more likely to accept her phone number and ask her on a date (Dutton & Aron, 1974). This is because our bodies

often get confused in distinguishing our reasons for arousal. The men on the bridge were feeling scared, so when approached by the woman, they mistook their fear for sexual attraction, and took her phone number (Dutton & Aron, 1974). While studying abroad, we feel all kinds of emotions. They range from excitement to fear to amazement and everything in between. When our bodies are in this state of being so stirred-up (i.e., aroused), we are more open to attraction.

Girlhood

Cath and Thea lived in the flats across from one another. Much like me, Thea had made up her mind that Cath was bothersome and thought they would probably not be great friends. Cath, on the other hand, found Thea boring, and she too, thought they would probably not be great friends. These feelings did not last long. After spending a few days together, Cath and Thea became pretty good friends. Around the same time, I was starting to come around in regard to my feelings on Cath as well. She had become quite the wing man for me and Henry. Apparently, Cath had been telling Thea all about me, saying how much she wanted us to meet. Luckily, it didn't take long before we did.

A few of the girls, Henry, and I had decided to partake in a campus tour. It was a whole event, which ended in the commons where the club fair was being held at the same time. After perusing my options a fair bit, I toyed with the idea of participating in the musical theater society's (Cecilians) production of *High School Musical* and then signed up for the Taylor Swift Society (duh). As we were leaving, I heard my name yelled across the castle-like quad. It was Cath. It could only be Cath. We greeted one another warmly and slowly transitioned into the new introductions of the surrounding bystanders.

Next to Cath stood a frail-looking girl. Her eyes were what I noticed first, they looked...aged... almost, like she had lived at least six different lives in her little 20 years on earth.

Her short, chopped brown hair framed her round face, accentuating her toothy smile perfectly. She was wearing green; she looked best in green. She was waving at me, so I waved back. We exchanged pleasantries when something caught my attention.

“I signed up to do *High School Musical*, the weekend show with the Cecilian Society,” Thea said to one of the other girls.

“Wait, really?” I asked, barely able to contain my excitement. I had wanted desperately to do this show, but was avoiding it because of my anxiety of having it to do without a potential friend.

“Yes! Are you going to too?”

“Yes! I am!” I smiled back at her. We were friends now.

It’s kind of a beautiful thing, really, how the meeting of my two best friends mirrored each other. I met Cath and instantly disliked her, only to discover later on that she was exactly what I needed: a foil. Cath and my friendship is the most developed relationship I have and will probably ever have. Where she was faulty, I was strong, and where I was faulty, she was strong. I think I disliked her so much at first because this realization made me feel insecure and uncomfortable. However, it manifested in such an amazing way that I had no choice but to continue getting to know her out of sheer wonder of where knowing her could take me. When I met Thea, I instantly liked her. She’s the kind of person who gives everything she has to the people she loves and expects nothing in return. I think that for the first time in a while, Cath and I were somehow able to make good on this transaction. Thea is the bravest, most selfless person I have ever had the great opportunity of loving. In that moment, standing on the corner of Kelvin Way and University of Glasgow Street, I had no idea how much these two would come to mean to me. Thea always knew.

Proof

I am who I am today because I met Cath and Thea. There is something so sacred about female-to-female friendships. Research has shown time and time again that the friendship between females is much more intimate the friendships between males (Benenson & Christakos, 2003). They are important in nearly every context, whether that be for developmental reasons, psychological well-being, or just for comfort's sake. This is a unique characteristic of female-to-female friendships. What I mean by this is, female friendship has the ability to enhance the female experience and provide a mirror into one's own self (Ridgeway, 2001). Scientists have concluded that, "closeness is a critical component of the human experience...whether it be called bonding, intimacy, unity, or interpersonal connection, closeness is at the heart of one's most significant life partnerships" (Parks & Floyd, 1996, p. 12). We as humans are biologically social beings who crave human interaction almost daily (Denworth, 2020). Loneliness is a killer.

Girlhood

Word on the street was a club called The Box was the place to be. We started in kitchen 13, gathering ourselves, and drinking putrid mixed drinks of whatever we could find. The Box was like any other club; loud, crowded, and sweaty. Henry joined us shortly after we arrived, and his roommate spent all night hitting on each of us individually. These interactions, though, were quickly overshadowed. I was standing next to Cath when a man holding a guitar walked in.

"That guy looks like Lewis Capaldi," she said, nearly cut off by a booming voice through the speakers.

"Hello, everyone! I'm Lewis Capaldi!" the man yelled into the microphone.

We all screamed and ran towards the stage. With Glasgow being his hometown, he played clubs there quite frequently and sporadically when he wasn't touring.

After he was done playing this one song, he announced that he was going to pay for everyone's drinks until 3 am.

Love?

Upon our arrival to at The Box, a complimentary vodka cranberry was shoved into my hand by Henry's roommate, who vehemently claimed it was from Henry. About five vodka cranberries later, my need for a cigarette became urgent and desperate. I pleaded with Cath to go outside with me. Probably knowing I wouldn't leave her alone until she gave me what I wanted, she kindly agreed.

As we were wading through the mobs occupying the dance floor, I felt a cold hand on my back. It was Henry asking to come with us. Before responding, I flashed Cath my pleading eyes as she rolled hers. Reluctantly, she said yes, followed by the muttering of some expletives under her breath about his request (which Henry surely heard, and Cath surely intended him to). Naturally, I only had two cigarettes. Following just a few more expletives from Cath, it was decided that Henry and I were to smoke them, and Cath was to return inside to the awaiting girls. It was freezing outside, signaling just how quickly the Glaswegian winter was coming. Henry wrapped his light blue, sweatshirted arms around me as the air filled with smoke and quiet laughter.

After nearly three hours of free drinks from Lewis Capaldi and an unnecessary amount of "girls, I just wanted to say how much I love you," we wandered on home. Once again, I felt that cold hand brush against my waist and heard the ever so familiar, "wait, Emma, do you wanna smoke?" Internally melting, I agreed. And there we were for the very first time, but certainly not the last, on the green bench in the tiny-tot park that would quickly become a cornerstone in our

relationship. Both of us now finally realizing just how inappropriately we were dressed for the cold weather of the night, we sat on our bench, shivering, smoking, and not speaking a word until I dropped the lighter into the dark abyss beneath us.

“Oops, sorry, I’ll get that,” I said, about to stand up.

“No, don’t, I’ll get it.” He smiled. I smiled back. It was so dark that the only way I could tell he was smiling was because his teeth flashed white in my otherwise black field of vision.

Now kneeling down to look under the bench for my precious violet lighter that I had stolen from Thea, he lit up his phone flashlight.

“I got it!” he proclaimed triumphantly. Again, his smile flashed white. We were about eye level at this point, him kneeling on one knee and me sitting on the bench. He asked to kiss me. I said yes.

Proof

I am a big fan of neurotransmitters. Really! I am! They are the unsung heroes of human life. One big part of this human life is pleasure, and lucky for us, humans have lots of pleasure pathways. The ruling lord of these are dopamine. There are pleasure pathways situated throughout that make up the reward system in the brain, most notably in the ventral tegmental area (where dopamine is formed) and then in the nucleus accumbens, eventually reaching the limbic system and our greater consciousness (Simpkins, 2013). When we experience pleasure, dopamine is shot through our brains, and once this happens, we are more likely to seek out that feeling again and again. Back in 2005, researchers at Harvard Medical School examined brain scans from 2,500 college students. They were presented images of people they loved and images of people they didn’t. When their eyes shifted to the people they loved, their reward systems lit up like fireworks (Edwards, 2015). Our brains love to love; it is almost like a drug.

For me, my dopamine levels were being routinely heightened as soon as I stepped foot on Glaswegian soil, due simply to the nature of studying abroad. Every new experience was foreign and unknown, which brought along with it higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol. When people are first falling in love, they, too, experience increased levels of dopamine and cortisol (Edwards, 2015). So when I went abroad, my cortisol and dopamine levels spiked greatly, but when I met Henry, they spiked even more. It is not hard to track why, then, I truly came to believe I loved him.

Growing Up in Glasgow

Thea and I had successfully infiltrated the Cecilian Society's weekend show of *High School Musical*. We auditioned on a Thursday, rehearsed Friday and Saturday, and by Sunday I was Gabriella. Despite the unrealistic time crunch, I knew all my lines, which amazed not only the entire creative team and cast, but myself as well. And Henry, who had probably put in an equal amount of work into memorizing and running my lines with me until 5 am, was ready for a show.

It went off without a hitch! The best crowd! The best acting choices! The best time ever! Anxiety raging, I remember stepping on stage and being instantly soothed by the enthusiastic crowd patiently awaiting the action. Their laughter was infectious. Even with a few missed lines and more than a few missed dance steps, the audience was along for the ride. The hugs, the flowers, and the well-wishes from the girls' brought tears to my eyes as we greeted each other postproduction. Cath admitted that the casual nature of the show changed her entire outlook on musical theater, teaching her that maybe all of those years spent at the acting grind were taken a tad too seriously (I am still trying to figure out if that is a compliment or not). *High School Musical* had quickly taken a pedestal stance in my mind. It is framed by the severe anxiety and imposter syndrome I had to overcome in order to fully commit to the production and by the confidence I still carry with me knowing I was able to pull it off in the end.

Girlhood

High School Musical was a huge steppingstone in my friendship with Thea and is something we still talk about a lot to this day. On the Saturday night before the show, I had a panic attack in the cloisters at school. I was completely unable to get control of my breathing. I had been up for probably the last 24 hours and knew I had to be up again all night in order to really memorize my lines. I felt absolutely overwhelmed and unworthy to have been given this opportunity to play Gabriella alongside people who had a much more established presence in the club. As I doubled over in the pain of not enough oxygen, there was Thea. Like a little lighthouse in the night, there she was, unmoving and unwavering even in the toughest of storms. She guided me through the attack and gave me every reassurance that I needed to hear. We ran lines until Henry eventually took over at around 2 am. This is the perfect example of who Thea is. *High School Musical* was the first time we shared a common interest, the first time we were completely alone in a new situation together, and the first time we shared such an exciting moment with just the two of us. Thea and I both feel very, very deeply and express these feelings in a similar way, very openly and very freely. I think *High School Musical* was the catalyst for our understanding of just how impactful this study abroad experience was really going to be.

Proof

In all of the literature I have looked into, study abroad is considered an extraordinary experience. Here, I am using an operational definition of “extraordinary experience” that is based on three factors: intensity, engagement, and temporality. Intensity is the ability of an experience to be emotionally and sensorily rich. Engagement is the unexpected nature of an experience and the fact of being immersed. Temporality means a limited time frame (Orazi & Laer, 2023). Extraordinary

experiences are subjective, sure, but having an operational definition in this case provides some objectivity for the purpose of this thesis.

Girlhood

I was more nervous for this first date with Cath and Thea together than I have ever been with any man. Although the three of us move as a unit now, it was not always like this. Cath and Thea had 2/3 of their classes together and lived right across the hallway from one another. It took me a little longer to weasel my way in. On this day, however, I texted Cath to go to Catch (the local sit-down fish and chip shop), and she asked if Thea could come too. I remember being a tad bit annoyed because I had every intention of running my mouth about Henry the entire time and didn't feel like spending time filling Thea in. But, I thought, I had really bonded with Thea during *High School Musical*, so maybe this would be a good thing.

"I have to physically stop myself from telling him I'm in love with him." That is my diary entry from that day, and something I told Cath and Thea on the loft seating in Catch. They exchanged worried and confused glances as they dusted their fish and chips with salt and vinegar. I don't remember much about the conversation after that, but this memory is forever burned in my brain, as I am sure it is theirs too.

Proof

Is love just classical conditioning? Did I get Pavlov-ed? Classical conditioning occurs when two stimuli are continuously paired; one is physiological stimulus, and one is a neutral stimulus (Bainemigisha, 2005). Eventually, after much pairing and training, the neutral stimulus will elicit the physiological response. In Ivan Pavlov's famous experiment, he paired a bell with food for his dogs (Sparzo, 2023). The food caused the dogs to salivate. So, when the dogs started associating the bell with the food, they began to salivate at the mere ringing of the bell (Bainemigisha, 2005).

Fascinating. But how does this connect to love? To me and Henry? I believe that, in this case, I began to associate all these great memories in Glasgow with good things happening to him and to our relationship. For months, I continued to establish this connection between Henry and positive emotions in Glasgow. Even now, my study abroad experience and Henry are intertwined in my mind. In hindsight, the real love story here was between my friends and me, but I was so wrapped up in him that I was unable to see that until now. I thought I was falling madly in love, but really, I was just classically conditioning myself.

CHAPTER TWO: OCTOBER 2022

Girlhood

By this time, my sleep schedule was royally screwed. We were all consistently up until about 2 am every single night. There was unregulated air conditioning in the flats and idiotic roommates who insisted on switching the lights on at the most inconvenient times (even now, I can still feel my blood boiling over this), not to mention Henry, who truly never got over his jetlag. We had all planned on going to St. Andrews the next morning, but by noon, the group actually committed to going had dwindled. Cath woke up feeling sick and a few girls forgot to buy their bus ticket (classic). I, however, was set on going even if we left 3 hours later than originally planned.

Following a very strict bus schedule carefully crafted by Thea, we spent the loveliest afternoon in St. Andrews. We played in the cool, blue sea water in our favorite sweaters as the joyful laughter engulfed the beach. Thea and I raced down the shore as the cuffs of our jeans grew salty from the ocean spray. I slept soundly that night, dreaming of spending the rest of my life living as simply as this.

Proof

One of the themes of my study abroad experience was discovering what it means to be human. Part of this was relearning awe, wonder, and how to appreciate each of them in a new light. Essentially, there are two components to this: awe as a response to coming across something mind-blowing or stunningly amazing that we never expected and awe as a change-maker in the brain, causing “little earthquakes in the mind” (Sima, 2022, p. 2). Throughout our lives, our brains become accustomed to what is mundane or normal in our day to day lives (Sima, 2022). But, experiencing awe is a break from the routine. Research shows that those who experience awe often have changes in perspective, lower stress levels, and an increase in their sense of meaning. Awe promotes

curiosity, creativity, and compassion (Sima, 2022). It is also just a healthy thing to do for our brains. When I stepped foot off that bus in St. Andrews, I was astounded by what I was seeing. I can report with 100% certainty that I was feeling awe.

Love?

That night, Henry's laundry machines broke in his dorm. He asked if he could come to my flat and do laundry at mine. Naturally, I said yes. To pass the time, we played flag matching games on his phone. This is one my fondest memories of the two of us. He was so funny, so intense about it.

"No! Stop! You're gonna get it wrong and mess up my score, Emma." He had the widest grin on his face as he chased me around the laundry reaching for his phone. Of course, I didn't know any of the flags. Of course, he knew every one of them.

"Woah, you're really good at this. I'm kind of amazed," I said crossing my arms. I watched as he slowly turned pink. We were standing so close that I could feel the warmth in his body rise to his face.

"Thanks," he said shyly. I jumped up on top of the washing machine as it shook, spinning his laundry round and round. He came over and stood beside me, still continuing to take his little flag quiz. Silence fell over the room, not an awkward silence, but more of a knowing silence. It was like we knew we had just shared some kind of moment. These flag quizzes became a constant in our relationship. It was something he could poke fun at me for (and vice versa, honestly). We would laugh so hard during these interactions, sitting side by side in the booth at the pub, causing a ruckus as per usual. He would make jokes about my music taste, I would joke him back about his obsession with school, and so on and so on. If he wasn't coming over to do his laundry, he was most likely coming over to smoke. By two weeks in, it was "our thing." My association between him and the

rush of nicotine strengthened as time went on, and what began as an innocent partaking in European culture quickly spiraled into a full-blown addiction.

Proof

Addiction is a nasty beast. We all know it. As mentioned above, many of our actions are governed by the pleasure pathways in our brain. This system that governs (and reinforces) our feeling of pleasure is especially sensitive to drugs (Edwards, 2015). Drugs, such as nicotine, affect the neurons in our brain, in turn, altering the reward pathways (Canadian Association for Neuroscience, 2014). Essentially, the nicotine in a cigarette “hijacks the reward pathway to cause a release of dopamine” (Canadian Association for Neuroscience, 2014, p. 1). On nicotine, the nucleus accumbens experiences an increase level of dopamine. Dopamine reinforces behavior because it leads to an increase in pleasure (Canadian Association for Neuroscience, 2014). Thus, an addiction grows. The constant cigarette smoking by my friends and me was pumping our already overly excited pleasure pathways with even more dopamine. I associated any fun night out with my friends with nicotine. Had I not studied abroad, my smoking habits would be completely different. This is a common theme among college students who study abroad (Nevils, 2008). Most students make claims that it was just a part of the culture in the city they were studying in, and I have to agree. My religion teacher at U of G had breaks built into his syllabus to accommodate his smoking. The English boy who sat next to me in history chain-smoked at 10 am as we walked from class. When I returned home, my hairdresser asked if I had taken up smoking because my blonde highlights had suddenly yellowed. We are taught and retaught the dangers of smoking from a young age, but studying abroad enforces a break from the norm, an embracing of a new culture. In general, the age of going to college is full of pushing and experimenting with boundaries, yet when studying abroad in a foreign country, this can be exacerbated (Nevils, 2008). In Scotland, smoking was a way to relate

to people, to make friends. I made many of my friends from the Cecilian Society via smoke breaks. Smoking was just treated differently there, and upon my return to the United States, I found it surprisingly easy to quit because it was simply not as accepted as it was in Glasgow.

Also, Henry and I smoked loads of cigarettes together. Every night, it was our excuse to see one another. The same reward pathway that was being stimulated by my positive feelings and interactions with him was also being stimulated by the drug nicotine. In turn, yes, I began to crave nicotine when I was with him, but mostly I think I craved the dopamine that filled my brain and body when we smoked cigarettes together.

Girlhood

The girls had decided to watch *Little Women* after spending the day before in the little sea town of St. Andrews. We had been healed by the ocean air, just like Jo had *attempted* to do with Beth. I had every intention of attending *Little Women* night and had even gone as far as to commit to bringing over a bottle of pink wine for it. I chose my outfit to reflect Amy March's big, blue dress in the movie. It was a pair of light, ocean blue silk pants and my white, puffy sweater that almost mimicked a marshmallow. Luckily, the common room was open, so we plopped down while Thea made hot chocolate and movie theater level popcorn. With chocolate and butter covered fingers, we settled in to enjoy our movie.

Love?

Jo and Laurie had barely begun to dance on the front porch of the big party when my phone started to ring. I got up to answer it. It was Henry. He asked if I wanted to go down to the pub with him and his roommate. Of course, this sounded like a complete and utter nightmare. The other day, we had found Henry's roommate's copy of *The Art of Seduction*. Some highlights from it include steps to seducing a woman: "choose the right victim, use the demonic power of words to sow confusion,

isolate the victim, and mix pleasure with pain.” The book looked rifled through and used. I decided that day that Joe was the last person I ever wanted to be caught in a situation alone with. Henry, however, chose to look past his creepiness (typical men) and insisted that it was my turn to hang out with his friends for once. I agreed to go to the pub, much to my chagrin. I went home and changed out of my perfect Amy March get-up, stopping to look at the frown painted on my face as I left my room. We popped on over to the local pub we had grown to love. It was unusually dark in there, darker than I have ever seen it. Before even sitting down, Joe was yapping.

“Emma, what’s your hot take?” He asked.

“Hot take on what?” I responded, not even meeting his eyes.

“Anything. Everything. Just an opinion that you keep close to you because you know other people won’t agree or even believe you.” A sinister smile covered his stubbled face as he plopped a cigarette in his mouth. I watched in disgust as he swished it around his spit filled mouth, corner to corner, remembering to hold it out the open window next to us to avoid sneers from the other bargoers. I am pretty sure I hated him.

Eventually reaching my threshold, I interrupted whatever he was saying to proclaim, “well I don’t believe in God, and I think lots of people use religion as a weapon and even as a safety net to excuse bad, mean behavior.” His mouth went slowly agape as he put his head in his hands. I quickly realized that maybe I had gone too far. I started to backtrack, but my ears perked as Henry chimed in.

“I agree with her actually.” His roommate looked at him, startled. Before we could even retort, he started a spiel about how God had saved his life as he held a knife to his stomach back when he was 16. The point to his story disappeared just as quickly as the whiskey in his glass. By the end of all of this, he was crying on the sidewalk about how his ex-girlfriend dumped him via

snapchat. We left shortly after. I walked home, cold, emotionally exhausted, and wishing for the chocolatey smiles of my friends and my smooth, silk pants.

Growing up in Glasgow

“A friend that you are afraid of is not a real friend.” Those wise words from Cath echoed through my empty bedroom. It was just the two of us, reading and rereading nasty, love bomb texts from a friend from school. My (ex) best friend, actually. Before Glasgow and before Cath and Thea, I was a bit more susceptible to emotional manipulation, especially in friendships. I had survived this girl for two years, watched as she seduced the boy I loved freshman year, and pushed away nearly every other friend we had with her inability to think of other people. I was along for the ride, and I had no idea how to get off. Luckily, she made a move in March of 2022 that, to me, shattered our friendship. I knew that I would have never done something like that to someone I considered a friend, let alone a best friend. In Glasgow, the topic of me deciding not to go to Rome to see her came up with Cath and Thea. After laying out our history, they were bewildered as to why I let it go on for so long. I didn't have an answer for them. Glasgow gave me a way out, a way to escape the jaws of the friendship I believed I was trapped in for all eternity. If not for Cath and Thea's example of an equal friendship where everyone *can* win, that girl would have stood in my wedding, which is a terrifying thought.

I always thought that friendship was black and white, and sometimes, in rare occasions, gray. Being with Cath and Thea taught me that friendship could exist in every single color of the rainbow, and when you opened yourself up to these colors, they infiltrate every fiber of your being, making you a more colorful person. This color permeated every aspect of my life in Glasgow. I was more fun to be around, more interesting to talk to, and just a better person in general. When you start to live and to love in such a colorful way, it becomes hard and even painful to wonder why you ever

allowed yourself to live in black and white for so long. Once I met Cath and Thea, my entire outlook on love and friendship shifted. I saw that I was capable of getting out exactly what I was putting in. It was as if the universe had been priming me and had me endure a somewhat abusive friendship for this specific purpose of meeting Cath and Thea. It's always felt so natural. It's not some cliché feeling of "they complete me," it's more of an overwhelming feeling of utter peace.

"Overwhelming" and "peace" existing in the same sentence may seem like a paradox, but here, it's not. No one ever has and I don't think no one ever will understand me as much as Cath and Thea do. I don't know if I've ever known a love so pure, so untouched by the outside world. It belonged to us and only to us. Study abroad created an environment where this was possible. We had all met at just the right time and under the right circumstances.

Proof

Women are more likely than men to experience emotional manipulation in same-sex friendship. Research shows that this is because women rely more heavily on their female friends when experiencing hardships and because they spend more time discussing more intimate topics. Consequently, women are more open to emotional manipulation by their friends (Abell, 2016). Women rely on relational aggression as their manipulation strategy. Relational aggression "refers to behavior that harms others through the manipulation of relationships using exclusion, gossip, and rumors" (Abell, 2016, p. 4). So, in order to be emotionally manipulated, there must be a level of trust present. I think that is what is so heart shattering about discovering a female friend has been emotionally manipulating you. Women who are capable of this do not make good friends, and usually are successful because they know how best to maintain control over their "friend" (Abell, 2016). I knew that I no longer wanted to be friends with my old roommate before I went to Glasgow, but as text after text rolled in with Cath and Thea looking on, they were the ones who

brought the possibility of emotional manipulation to the surface. From that moment on, no longer weighed down by that situation, I began to move forward in my journey of friendship. Thank goodness for Glasgow is all I have to say.

Girlhood

“Do you love him?”

“What?”

The group suddenly went silent as about twelve eyes shift their focus towards me. It was the night of one of our friend’s 22nd birthday dinner and was easily one of the best nights we all had in Glasgow. Now, however, the ever-so-rash women seated at the table have posed a question that I surely did not yet have an answer to. Taken aback, I started stuttering. No one had asked me that. I think I admitted it to myself privately in my head but lacked the courage and the words to articulate what I was feeling to the girls. Having to say it out loud forced me to think more critically about it. Was I really in love with Henry? Maybe I was just insane (something to think about, sure). I took my time before I piped up again. By now, the girls had lost interest in what I had to say and had moved on to talking about more engaging topics. With my thoughts finally gathered, I interrupted their conversation about Costco hotdogs and said, “I think I am in love with who he could be. He’ll make a great man one day for some very lucky girl. I just don’t know if that girl is supposed to be me.” And for the first time in two months, they were silent.

Love?

This is probably the most vivid day in my memory of Glasgow. Henry and I had decided not to talk about any plans after December until my post-Thanksgiving trip to the Highlands with the girls. That lasted about 4 days. One of the girls’ friends from home was visiting, and we all had

decided to go out to our favorite little dive bar with the absolute dreamiest bartender known to man, Dram. The bar had massive, wooden tables that extended through half of the bar and encased us in the only overhead light, almost as if there was a spotlight illuminating the scene about to unfold. Cath and Thea arrived later than everyone else after a history club pub crawl, followed shortly by Henry. His roommate was kind enough (motivations unclear) to buy everyone drinks all night. With the drinks and conversation flowing, someone brought up the topic of studying abroad ending. At this point, no one had been brazen enough to broach the subject. We all knew it was inevitable, but it hurt desperately and scared us to death to talk about. And besides, maybe if we didn't think or talk about it, it wouldn't happen. Out of nowhere, one of the girls turns to me and Henry, soft smiles, and asks, "are you two going to do long distance?" My body went numb as my tongue fell down the back of my throat. Henry had simply lost all of the blood in his body at this point, turning about as pale as the candles sitting in front of us. The look on his face still replays in mind. His squinted eyes, rosy cheeks that quickly overcame his entire face, and the way his hand, once placed on my pink pants, pulled back with disgust. Overwhelmed by the situation and feeling a loss of control that left me searching for a lifeboat that was never really there, I responded the way I assumed he would, considering he had just finished telling me how much he cared for me.

"No," he says.

"Yes," I say at the exact same moment.

We exchanged horrified looks. Everyone did. Needless to say, we murdered the party. Shortly after, we offered frenzied goodbyes and left. I insisted on taking the normal route home, down Kelvin Way. Henry, on the other hand, was itching to settle this, and practically dragged me through the park instead. There were no overhead lights and with him refusing to even look in my

direction, I put all of my strength into focusing on the ground ahead of me, step by step. It was freezing and he didn't offer me his coat. The walk was long. And quiet.

"You need to calm down, I promise the girls were just making casual conversation. It's really no big deal. No one even cares, it's our decision and completely irrelevant to them," I said as I steadied my hands to open the lock to the flat.

"But it's really not though. Everyone is leaving, Emma, and eventually, we are all going to have to decide which relationships are worth keeping," he snapped.

I wrinkled my brow, confused by the sudden shift in mood of this seemingly normal conversation. He raked his hands through his chocolate brown hair like Danny Zuko and looked up at me still struggling to open the flat. The walk had completely knocked out the feeling in my hands, leaving them red, purple, and a little bit stained from the inevitable stress-response cigarettes consumed. I remember how bad they were shaking.

"It's just too much for me to even think about right now, with school and everything," he said.

"What? Then why would you even answer?"

"Because I thought you were going to say no too! I haven't even thought about it, *you and I* haven't even talked about it, and for your friends to bring it up like it's some casual, little thing is so frustrating!"

I knew the last thing I should do was to feed into his anxiety, but I couldn't help myself. Since the moment we met, Henry was all in, and he never missed an opportunity to tell me so. Yet, the second someone outside of the two of us asked about the state of our relationship, he panicked, deflected, and couldn't handle the emotional pressure. This surprised me about him, yes, but mostly,

it infuriated me. Who was he to make me all of these promises and then run away from them just as fast?

“You’re a coward,” I whispered under my breath, unsure if I really wanted to say it.

“What?”

“You’re a coward,” I repeat, louder this time.

Now it was his turn to wrinkle his brow.

“I’m literally not. I’m not even the one who brought it up in the first place. I didn’t want to have this conversation for months and you know that!”

“I don’t want to either, but we can’t act like it isn’t going to happen! We have to talk about this, make some type of a decision.”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” I question, fearful of the answer.

“I can’t do long distance. I just can’t. I’m so sorry.”

The flat door finally popped open. I went inside. Alone.

I regret a lot about that night....at least, I think I do. I regret acting so brash. I regret pushing him to make a decision when I knew he wasn’t ready. I regret letting myself fall so hard so quickly. We didn’t exactly stop seeing one another after this, but it was never the same. How do you exist happily in a relationship when there is an expiration date attached to it? That night, I went into my room and I wrote him a letter. I had heard that people do this as a way to handle emotions that have not yet been processed or when they didn’t have the chance to say everything they needed to. At this point, what did I have to lose?

Looking back, I grieve for this past version of myself, the Emma that was so caught up in this fling that she could not see all of the magic and wonder happening so clearly around her in the friendships she was creating. I grieve for Henry, too. He was just as caught up in everything as I was. We were so blinded and so confused about what we were feeling, and we let that anxiety out on one another. I wish I could tell him that we had completely misattributed our arousal, but I don't think he would appreciate that now.

I called Cath and Thea that night, barely able to choke out the words I needed to tell them. But before I even could, the intercom buzzed and I heard their glorious voices below, demanding to be let in. Cath wrapped her arms around me, kissing my head whenever it wasn't moving uncontrollably as I attempted (and failed) to regulate my breathing. Thea, who possesses more empathy than a room full of licensed therapists, stroked my back as she offered words of reassurance and the promise that if I wanted them to, they could have Henry dead by morning. This made me laugh. Then we all started laughing. Snot rolling down my face, Cath and Thea held my hands. Thea told me to give her the letter. They knew if I had it that I would want to give it to him out of pure selfishness and some intrinsic need to be accepted by him. The three of us agreed that if I still wanted to give it to him before we left that I could, but for now, it belonged to them. So, there it sat, in Thea's desk drawer with a small sticker sealing it shut until December 16th.

Proof

Love is the greatest predictor of human happiness. More than wealth, more than success, and more than fame (Dutton & Aron, 1974). Falling in love is a great and beautiful human ability that we sometimes take for granted. The area of the brain that regulates emotional connection is known to be evolutionarily old, which points to the greater idea that we, as humans, have a

biological predisposition to love (Edwards, 2015). But this does not only mean romantic love, it can be love of any kind. For me, this means the love between me, Cath, and Thea.

Girlhood

Originally, I had not planned on going with the girls to the Isle of Skye. Wrapped up in Henry and our most recent outbursts, I had wanted to stay home and go on a tour of the Tennent's factory instead (dumb). Naturally, I was the last person Henry and his roommate wanted on that Tennent's tour, so while sitting in Kitchen 13, I announced that I was to attend the Isle of Skye festivities. Thea was ecstatic, especially considering she knew how badly I wanted to go to Loch Ness. Cath, on the other hand, saw right through my spectacle, probably knowing instantly that they were my second choice. Henry came over the night before, but not until about 2 am. For our entire time in Glasgow, Henry was unable to get on a normal sleep schedule. It drove me absolutely bonkers and messed up my sleep schedule in the process. Nearly missing the bus the next morning, I ran the entire way to Buchanan bus station and was met with displeased looks from Cath and Thea.

"What's your deal? I made it, didn't I?" I say through labored panting.

"Barely," says Cath, biting her tongue.

Ignoring what I knew was genuinely my fault, we settled in for the 6-hour bus ride north. I fell asleep quickly, needing a stranger to shake me when we arrived at an M&S for our first stop. A few of the girls and I bought bumble bee blankets, hot coffee, and pineapple to endure the rest of the trip up to the Isle. We drove through gigantic mountains that peaked at every turn. They were covered in a moss-like grass that framed the monstrosities perfectly. As soon as we reached the Portree bus station, we were off on a hike up a mountain that Thea (who planned all of our trips, of course) had found. We reached the top and I gasped at just how beautiful the landscape of the Isle

of Skye was; it truly was the most beautiful place on earth. Because we were, after all, still in Scotland, it started pouring immediately after. Soaked beyond compare, we ran to the nearest pub, not avoiding dark stares from the patrons as we tracked in dirt, mud, and puddles upon puddles of water with us. One by one, the girls peeled off to go to bed at our nearby hostel, leaving me, Cath, and Thea. Finally able to pick their brains on all that had occurred that day, we all came to the realization that we disliked one girl in the group. Is there anything that brings girls closer together than gossip and a mutual hatred? Definitely not. We laughed so, so hard. We sat in that pub for what felt like 12 hours, but at the same time, felt like 12 minutes. I guess that is what a meaningful friendship feels like. I had not experienced that in a while. While sitting in the pub, our phone service was going in and out. Henry and I had been texting, and I suppose my phone was getting confused as his texts came in. Long story short, this resulted in each of his texts being sent around 14 times. So, the three of us sat, unmoving, and practically crying as the text “Great! Glad you’re having a good time!” illuminated the screen over and over again, which was just about the best thing ever. We went home that night after the pub closed and sat on the floor of the hostel, giggling until another girl eventually picked up her stuff and moved rooms. Unfazed, we told stories, went over family history, and talked about our hopes for the future after our study abroad experience.

Proof

In the fall of 2023, after study abroad had long ended, I asked Cath and Thea why they felt it had been so easy for us to become friends while in Glasgow. Of course, by this time, I was knee-deep in my research into relationships during extraordinary experiences, but I needed to hear what they were thinking. At first, we were tempted to blame it all on fate, that in the greater design of the universe, we were always meant to be friends. However, eventually, we decided that it was all about circumstance and the same emotional journey that study abroad puts you on, as demonstrated by the

endless blogs I have studied (Shafer, 2018). Study abroad is an interesting form of travel because it really does attract a certain type of person. The first step in studying abroad is making the choice to do it in the first place. In my opinion, it requires a level of restlessness, a desire for *more*. When you study abroad, you are agreeing to be uncomfortable, to be forced outside of your comfort zone.

What makes that easier is friends. Moving to a foreign country all alone is terrifying, but you quickly find people just like yourself because they just did the exact same thing. You are simply more likely to form such intense friendships because you know you only have a short amount of time and also because the people there are just like you.

Girlhood

We had finally reached reading week. Similar to a “fall break” that we see in the US, reading week marked the middle of the semester. After three painstakingly difficult days in the library in which Cath, Thea, and I did about seven weeks of work, they went off to galivant across Europe. Meanwhile, I had already agreed to travel to the south of France and Barcelona with the remaining girls. We had a small incident in the Edinburgh airport where we were caught talking badly about the Duke students with their snarky roommate unknowingly standing behind us (I got reprimanded for this by Henry in a Tesco upon my return, fear not), but other than that, we landed safely in Carcassonne, France via RyanAir. Out of all of the cities we travelled to, Carcassonne was my favorite. It was quaint, untouched by loads of tourists that flocked to Paris, and had a special charm that reminded me of New Orleans, my hometown. The city center was a literal castle. Left behind from medieval times, the city grew and expanded on the outskirts, leaving the castle intact. It was one of the most astonishingly beautiful places I have ever seen. The air bnb we were staying at was nothing short of perfect, equipped with a massive jacuzzi that we all piled into at the end of each night. We drank copious amounts of cheap champagne, each taking turns shaking and spraying it all

over the damp room where the jacuzzi resided. Dragging my pink suitcase across the cobblestone streets, we boarded a bus from Carcassonne to Barcelona. We had about a day and a half in Barcelona, so we made sure to hit La Sagrada Família and Park Güell. Naturally, you cannot leave Europe without being called “stupid Americans” at least once, which we accomplished as we walked around Park Güell with our phone flashlights due to their lack of any overhead lighting and our poor planning (no Thea on this trip). It was stunning nonetheless. Again, we bussed from Barcelona back to the south of France, this time landing in Perpignan. We struggled a little bit with activities to do in the small, coastal town, but the food and art museums truly made up for it. By this time, the good attitudes were dwindling, and we were ready to get back home to celebrate Halloween.

Growing up in Glasgow

I learned a lot about travelling during this trip. First and foremost, flying on RyanAir probably cured me of my fear of flying. For unknown reasons that I will forever be indebted to, I was upgraded and got to sit in the very first row of the plane. During the flight, the two (male) pilots *left the cockpit* to flirt with the two (female) flight attendants. I looked around in utter terror at my fellow passengers. *Surely* this was not allowed. Eyes wide and suddenly Catholic again, I watched as no one flew the plane. As we landed in France, I frantically called my pilot-in-training little brother to share with him what I had just seen. Expecting him to be grateful that I had escaped with my life, he actually told me that commercial airline pilots only had control of the plane during take-off and landing. This may not be comforting to some people but learning this after watching just how casual the RyanAir pilots were while flying a literal plane soothed my flying anxiety ten-fold.

Second, I learned how to travel in group settings. Compromising was key during this trip. I also think that not having many expectations about the trip made it more enjoyable for me because I was not disappointed if I really wanted to see something that my friends did not. I would not exactly

describe myself as “go with the flow,” but this trip pushed my boundaries a little bit. Last but not least, I discovered that I really had no desire to visit “big” cities. I could go my entire life without going to Barcelona or Rome again. The cities were overrun with tourists and although it was cool to see all of the major sights, I realized I much preferred to travel to the smaller, hidden gems like Carcassonne and Perpignan. I think that is why I fell in love with Glasgow so quickly; it possessed a certain grit that Edinburg didn’t while still being fully immersed in Scottish culture. It was small enough to walk around comfortably, but big enough that we were never bored. I could have been perfectly content staying put for those three and half months, but I am beyond glad I still decided to travel.

Proof

Travel is important in development. The opening of oneself to new cultures and new experiences can only be beneficial to. Travelling takes us on many journeys, but most importantly, it takes us on a quest for truth (Richards, 1974). We are looking for the truth hidden deep within ourselves. Only by testing our limits and seeing new places is this type of self-discovery possible. In the novel *Why Grow Up?* Susan Neiman writes, “travel is as important for learning about yourself and your own culture as it is for understanding others” (Neiman, 2014, p. 145). Travel is crucial in development. It opens people up to new cultures, new insights, and even new friends. It broadens our horizons and removes the confines of a classroom, teaching young people the importance of experiential education (Orazi & Laer, 2023). Studying abroad is unique in this way because not only are you travelling to new places, but it also falls under the category of an “extraordinary experience.” There is much literature surrounding the impact of extraordinary experiences on development, and in turn, how there is much maladjustment following (Orazi & Laer, 2023). After living abroad and going through so much growth, I felt that returning was like trying to put on shoes that no longer

fit. In addition, I felt that I grew in my cultural awareness, from a self-centered cultural mindset to a more pluralistic one (Rexeisen, 2013). Travelling really does challenge us to look at life from new perspectives and removes the confines of time, allowing for huge leaps and jumps into the past (Richards, 1974). In my case, when I saw really amazing and beautiful things, like the Cliffs of Moher for example, I had to remind myself just how lucky I was to be standing there in that very moment, and how many people had stood in the exact spot, but in their own, unique moments in time.

With this new-found outlook on my life and my size in this world, I knew that I had to make my next big decision. It started with me letting go of my toxic friendship with my old roommate. And it ended with me dumping Henry.

CHAPTER THREE: NOVEMBER 2022

Love?

I was lying on my back with my feet up against the wall, sugar covering my hands and face when he walked in.

“Hi,” he said, flopping down on the bed next to me. It shook and sugar bounced around my peripheral vision. He reached into the red bag resting on my chest and pulled out a sour straw. His chewing echoed in my ear. We laid there in silence for a while, sucking on the candy, and staring blankly at the ceiling above. My dirty blonde hair slowly melted into his chocolate brown as the sun began to set behind us.

“The light,” I whisper, sitting up. Sugar fell into his hair. I can still picture it now.

“What?”

“The sun. It’s gone.”

“Oh.”

90 seconds of silence passed us by.

“Do you want me to go?” He asked.

“No. I was just saying. I’ll be right back.”

I stood up and walked to the kitchen to grab the bottle of wine Cath had dropped off earlier that day. It was cold and I rubbed it on my forehead, taking a long and deep breath. I had spent the afternoon in tears, jumping from phone call to phone call with my hometown best friend and Cath and Thea. We had all lamented about Henry, and I had come to the conclusion that I had to end whatever was going on with him. I knew that I would be angry with myself if I let our unstable

relationship go on and completely overshadow my study abroad experience. And besides, I had no idea how to navigate a relationship that was set to end so soon, and I had no intention of figuring it out. After gathering myself and my thoughts, I walked back into the room with a wine glass and a cup. We had already broken the other three glasses. He asked about my trip to France and Spain while I poured. He smiled his goofy grin, and we laughed about the funny things my friends had said or did. I think he always knew we were going to be strangers come January. I think I did too but was never strong enough to admit it to myself.

“I missed you,” he said quietly as he laid his head in my lap.

Silence. I looked up again at the ceiling to stop the tears from streaming down my face. I felt I truly loved him, so I knew I owed it to both of us to end this.

I told him we could not see each other anymore because it was impacting our time in Glasgow. I told him I was spending way too much time waiting around for him each night. I told him this was the end. He cried, I cried, and then he left, and I cried some more. I texted him that night. This is a direct transcript of the text messages sent between us:

Me: “Did you know I was unhappy?”

Henry: “Yes.”

Me: “And you would have let it go on until December even though we weren’t going to do long distance?”

Henry: “I don’t know if I ever fully processed things since it happened so quickly but I definitely enjoyed our time together. *Just not sure if it was meant to be if that makes sense I guess.* Sorry if it doesn’t seem positive looking back on it.” (Cath, Thea, and I still quote this message to this day)

After that we stopped texting. He never really answered my questions, nor did I ever get any closure. What even is closure though? He really had confirmed what I suspected that night in October: he was a coward. Despite me being the one putting all of this into action, I was still left heartbroken.

Growing up in Glasgow

The best decision I ever made for my own personal growth was studying abroad, but second to that was breaking up with Henry. Usually, I allowed relationships to go on for too long, even knowing that they were impeding every aspect of my life and mental health. Now, nearly three months into my study abroad and with numerous new lessons on relationships under my belt, I was able to see that Henry's and my feelings for one another were simply not enough. I felt that it was a case of "right person, wrong time." However, present Emma can see that there were so many other psychological factors at play that led me to believe this, which is really what this whole thesis is all about. Yet, I do think that these two ideas can coexist. The part of me that still resides in Glasgow will always love Henry, but life had to move on, *I* had to move on, and part of my process of digesting everything I had gone through there was realizing that maybe I didn't love him as much as I thought I did. Allowing myself to accept both of these ideas has helped to shape my more adult and more developed feelings on love in general.

Proof

I knew that there was no way I was alone in this. I had heard countless stories growing up about people in my own community falling in love during extraordinary experiences, like on Catholic mission trips for example. When I went searching for hard hitting evidence of this phenomena, the Peace Corps volunteers kept coming up. Apparently, 75% of Peace Corps volunteers come back married, engaged, or absolutely in love (Porzucki, 2011). You read that right. *75%*. Once again, let's

talk about dopamine. Something I didn't know is that sudden change triggers a lot of dopamine release in the brain (Porzucki, 2011). With dopamine in control (as I have discussed), it becomes easy to fall in love. There is also an aspect of trust in these Peace Corps relationships that is unique to falling in love during extraordinary experiences. According to Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist, you have to trust the people around you fully, without question, and very quickly when you leave everything you know behind to be in the Peace Corps (Porzucki, 2011). The volunteers around you are the only people you have in this new life. This causes a rewiring in the brain, a chemical predisposition to fall in love because you trust them so deeply (Porzucki, 2011). There is also an element of adventure in the Peace Corps that is similar to studying abroad. Cortisol and dopamine fly through your veins when on an adventure, leading to bonds being formed with the people you are exploring with (Porzucki, 2011). I continued to read story after story about volunteers, not just in the Peace Corps, from all over the world falling in love. Extraordinary experiences have such a beautiful way of bringing people together, even if it is fleeting.

Girlhood

I woke up the next morning sad. By now, all of the girls knew about Henry and my break up. Cath and I walked to our favorite place, Roots and Fruits, to get a coffee. Sniffly, teary eyed, and exhausted, imagine my surprise when I walked back into the living room of my flat to see all of my friends standing there with open arms, treats, flowers, and a plan to go see highland cows in Pollock Park. I was completely unable to express my gratitude in the moment, so I just began uncontrollably sobbing. We all sat around the stuffy living room while Thea braided my hair and I told them all that had transpired the night before and why I had come to the decision to end our relationship. They shook their heads in understanding, occasionally letting out “mmhmms” to show their undying support of me and the journey I was on in my development of self. I have felt this type of love

between friends before- I have four hometown friends who have known me and seen me through nearly every stage of my life- but to be loved by these girls so deeply after only knowing each other for three months is something only Glasgow could have shown me.

CHAPTER FOUR: DECEMBER 2022

Girlhood

Our time in Glasgow was truly coming to an end, and while in denial, I signed up to bungee jump (naturally). Slowly but surely, I convinced a few of the girls to join me. Cath was adamant she was not joining us. Much to my surprise, however, Thea was the first to agree. She loved life more than anyone I had ever met. Friendship is such a beautiful thing. Every day I was learning more and more about these women that caused me to love them more and more. A few days ago, Thea and I dragged Cath to a Cecelian Society function where she had her first Long Island iced tea (her go-to while at home) since arriving in Glasgow. All night, I had been toying with the idea of texting Henry. I brought this up as we walked home, rum, tequila, vodka, and gin coursing through Cath's veins. She stopped in the middle of the street, punched me in the stomach, and screamed "it's me or him!" at the top of her lungs. I fell to the ground, unable to control my laughter, where Thea quickly joined me as Cath skipped around our now "dead" bodies. I loved them *so much*. Now, we were in my kitchen making sangria.

"Jump off a bridge? You have to be joking!" Cath scoffed as she slid apples and oranges into the awaiting tin.

"Once in a lifetime opportunity here, Cath, with your best friends in the best place on earth," Thea persuaded. I walked over, smiling, to hand Thea the bottle of red wine I had just pulled out of the freezer. Thea's body was always in a constant state of flight or fight due to her anxiety, and I think she found it comforting to experience an additional adrenaline rush every now and then. For me, bungee jumping sounded like a perfect way to tie a bow on my study abroad. We were fighting a losing battle in trying to convince our dearest Cath though.

“I will be here to hear all about it when you come back! Take lots of pictures for me!” said Cath, pulling the two of us into a huge bear hug.

The next morning, four of us girls were off to Pitlochry to bungee jump! I remember just how on edge I was the entire bus ride. It was about a three-hour journey in total up to the Highlands. The thing I was most worried about was the bungee cord snapping. Thea was worried about hitting the water below and meeting an untimely end. Luckily, the experts could not have been any kinder, and they guided us perfectly. I went third, following a friend who had already been skydiving. I don’t think I was nervous until I was standing on the very edge and the guide said “one, two, three, BUNGEE,” which signaled my jump. The experience of free falling is unlike anything I had ever felt. The feeling of being so weightless is extremely disconcerting, yet insanely real at the same time. My face hurt afterwards, and I was in complete shock that I had really just done that.

Proof

New experiences legitimately alter the chemistry of our brains. It all comes down to neuroplasticity, which is the brain’s ability to adapt and change (Cherry, 2022). Without this amazing ability, our brains would remain stagnant our entire lives; we really wouldn't be able to learn or appreciate new things, and this would lead to a pretty boring existence (Cherry, 2022). The human brain loves to experience new and exciting things because it leads to more activity and stimulation in the neurons (*New and diverse experiences linked to enhanced happiness*, 2020). This, in turn, increases overall happiness (*New and diverse experiences linked to enhanced happiness*, 2020). A completely novel experience, like bungee jumping for example, creates new connections in the brain, increases happiness levels, and as a result, makes us more likely to seek out such unique experiences like this in the future.

Love?

I had decided that I was going to give Henry the letter. The Cairncross girls had told me that he was leaving in the afternoon of December 16th. I made a few edits and was up all night in anticipation.

“This could change everything,” I thought to myself, “I’ll just tell him *everything*.” I put on my favorite sweater and made the 1-minute walk across the street. Tomorrow I was leaving, but today, I was going to lay it all on the table. I raced down the narrow hallways that I had grown to know every inch of. My fingers stretched across the walls, moving ever so slightly with every crevice. I was moving so fast that I had to fight the urge to jump down the three little stairs that lay waiting for me right in front his door. I stood, still and unmoving in front of that door, for what felt like hours, collecting myself. “Wait, do I really want to do this?” I questioned. Looking back, I think I was searching for some semblance of “closure,” but I knew deep down, even then, that he would never be able to give me what I needed. So, I suppose that I really just wanted to see him one last time. I shook my head to remove these thoughts and raised my fist to knock on the door. Before I could, it swung open. I nearly fell forward with the momentum piled in my hand ready to knock.

“Oh hi,” his roommate says. He’s taking out the trash.

“I---I need, I mean I want---”

“He left.”

You know how in movies when a car gets blown up or someone is shot at and the audience hears a low, screeching “eeeeee” noise? That’s what it sounded like in my ears in that moment.

“What? What do you mean?”

He scooted past me, and I saw the empty room.

“He left, he’s gone. This morning.”

“No. No he couldn’t have, he wasn’t supposed to leave until this afternoon. No.”

“Sorry, Emma,” and with that, I am left standing in his room, without him.

I crumpled the letter in my hand and walked out of Cairncross for the last time.

Once I got outside, I started sobbing. Standing was becoming painful, and I needed a place to sit. I looked over and saw the bench that he and I had sat on dozens of times. I couldn’t bring myself to sit there and ruin our memories, so I sat on the ground. Not even 9 am and there I was, sitting on the steps in front of Cairncross inconsolable. My thumbs slowly became stained with blood as I picked and picked at the raw skin surrounding my innocent nails. I put my head in my hands and noticed something sticky. I looked down into my now damp palms, and there it was: the tiny, yellow umbrella sticker that sealed everything I was scared to tell him out loud. It reminded me of the rain jacket I wore the night we met. I couldn’t help but laugh. The person I was, the girl that stood in her little yellow rain jacket in the packed Cairncross lobby no longer existed. I got up and I walked home without turning back.

Much to my everlasting chagrin, a piece of me stayed on those steps that day. In some alternate dimension, I think I am still there, with the yellow sticker stuck to my hand. I decided I would never forgive him. Maybe one day I will feel differently, but when he left knowing the letter existed, something changed in me. I don’t think I can ever let myself fall for someone in that way again, trust someone so blindly, and give them my entirety without guaranteeing I can ask for some back of it back. Henry carries pieces of me with him, up there in Boston, just like I do too. In some weird way, this is a beautiful thing.

Four years ago, Dr. Howe and Dr. Narcisi told our honors cohort, freshly eighteen and scared out of our minds for what lie ahead, that we are a mosaic of everyone we have ever loved and will ever love. Although I have held this statement close to me through countless stages and relationships in my life, I do not think I understood the gravity of what was being said until Glasgow. Henry and I will never see or speak to one another again in this lifetime as the people we are now, but that's okay. We don't need to. Even if he makes good on his infamous "call me after graduation" line, I wouldn't pick up, but I think I know he wouldn't call. I feel lucky to have met him and lucky to never hear from him again.

Growing up in Glasgow

It was time to go. My trip to Glasgow had officially ended and there I was, sobbing my eyes out on the streets of Glasgow for the last time. I had bought a massive suitcase from Primark the day before, so I now had to lug two big suitcases and my little, pink suitcase down the stairs. I left with so, so much more than I came with. Once again, I found myself cursing whoever had built this building without an elevator. I was reminded of the kind Americans who had helped me carry my stuff up as I carried it down all by myself.

"Thank you," I said one last time before closing the door to my flat.

AFTER

Time and time again, in beautiful scenes that I knew were fleeting, I would think to myself “I will never feel this way again. I will never love a place or people this much again.” Sitting at the table at Islay Inn, surrounded by my friends, smiling and laughing, I was grieving. Grieving what I knew would eventually come to an end. Grieving these past versions of ourselves that were irrevocably altered by Glasgow. We all felt it, but left it unspoken for reasons I cannot begin to understand. I would look around the table, cherishing the looks on their faces as I (yet again) dominated our card games, all while feeling a horrible, terrible loss. There is a phrase for this. It’s called anticipatory nostalgia (Batcho & Shikh, 2016). I use this phrase to describe what I was experiencing because even though I was physically sitting at the pub with everyone I loved, my heart was breaking at the prospect of losing each other so soon. I remember shushing everyone every time someone would mention our leaving. In retrospect, this made the loss even more difficult to cope with because we did not deal with the emotions of it all until the very last day. We were all so ill-equipped to handle long-distance friendship that Cath, Thea, and I are really the only ones to have survived. The emotions of leaving seemed to pour out of every single one of us in every single way imaginable. I was inconsolable on December 16th and 17th. I felt a horrible sadness, yes, but what I remember the most was how scared I felt. Scared to lose these people and to no longer be in this place, but mostly to lose this experience that had moved me beyond compare.

Coming back after such a transformative experience is hard to say the least. I went home and was experiencing such enormous grief that I felt as if I could have burst into tears at any moment. The anxiety, for me, was all consuming when I returned to Regis. I came back a different person and people would constantly ask me “oh how was Glasgow?” This was always triggering to me. I had lived a life so untouched by everything I thought I previously knew, I fell in love, I saw some of the

most stunning places on earth, and these idiots had the audacity to ask me how it was? Usually, I just replied with a simple “oh it was good,” but inside I was fuming. I knew that coming back would be difficult, but I never expected it to be as devastating as it was.

Everyone lectured me about culture shock and how best to deal with it, but no one warned me about reverse culture shock. Reverse culture shock is the difficulty in readjusting to life at home following time abroad or in a new place (Jin, 2022). Assimilation back into the school system, social life, and family dynamics after living such a vivid life shook me. My parents did not seem to understand all I had experienced. Neither did my friends, who couldn’t stand my constant need to talk about my time studying abroad and responded with impatient glares or rolled eyes. In retrospect, this was me just trying to process my extraordinary experience. However frustrating that was, though, it was unfathomably grueling to go back to school and do work all the time. Nothing could have prepared me for that maladjustment. To be fully transparent, I went to maybe 15 total class periods the entire three months I was in Glasgow. It wasn’t a priority; we were too busy actually living to be in any way motivated to write a paper about something I could not care less about. I was nauseatingly aware of how alive and free I was in the moment. How do you just go back to sitting at tiny desks in tiny classrooms after living such a huge life? You don’t. Not easily anyway.

In developmental psychology, there is the concept of a “grief wheel.” This principle of grief says that it will take a full year to feel any type of normalcy after losing someone or something dear to you. While, of course, me leaving Glasgow is not at all the same as somebody dying, I felt like I was grieving even so. It took me exactly one full year to realize that I was not truly in love with Henry. It also took me one full year to truly appreciate my experience rather than wishing I could go back. But life moves on, and that is truly a lesson that I have had to relearn at nearly every stage of

my life. When I started this process back in January of 2023, the trajectory of the thesis and my story in general was completely different. Just as I was going through the wheel of grief, so was my thesis. Now, I have come out on the other side with a piece of work I can be even more proud of. I stomp around *a lot* less about no longer being in Glasgow, and I have done something that a year ago I never would have thought was possible: I fell in love again.

END

I knew what the meaning of life was at a young age. I was twelve, to be exact. My dad was being awarded a lifetime achievement award for his contributions to the sport of volleyball in Louisiana and was to be inducted into the hall of fame. He had a beautiful speech planned, practiced, and memorized. But when he went up to give it, he started crying. I was mortified. He was crying so hard that he couldn't even speak. Startled and confused, I wondered what could have driven this grown man, whom I only ever knew as unflappable, to break down in tears in this packed convention center. It was love. The love he had for the sport, for his mentors, his teammates, his family. Love. I always thought that love was meant to be perfect, in every form of the word. Surely, my parents' love is perfect. Shouldn't all love be perfect and easy? Isn't that what we all want? No, of course not! We are never perfect, so why would the way we love be perfect? After Glasgow, I can see that maybe the love between my parents was never truly perfect, instead, I just perceived it in this way during a time when I thought all love had to be perfect. Love is driven by so many factors beyond our control. That is what makes it so unpredictable and beautiful and uniquely human.

Glasgow taught me that love *has to be* imperfect. It has to be messy and complicated to show you time and time again that you *want to* make it work, or even, you *need to* make it work. That is what is so great about being human. To allow yourself to be imperfect with the people you love is the greatest measure. It changes you. This realization that I made while studying abroad drives my life now. I am more open to this imperfect way of loving. I am more vulnerable and lighter, finally allowing myself to let go of these impossible standards. It has also shown me what being alive is really all about. It's about that pain in your stomach that you feel from laughing too hard, the feeling of rain on your face after a long day locked in the library; it's about being held in your friends' arms

while you sob and scream; it's about the beauty of new experiences coated in the beauty of learning to appreciate the silence. It's about grief and heartbreak and joy and surprise. It's about allowing yourself to relish all of these different emotions while acknowledging your and the people you love's humanity and ability to be imperfect. It's about freefalling. The beauty of being human is the beauty of simply being alive with these perfectly imperfect, enormous emotions.

EPILOGUE

This thesis started as a love story. An epic, exciting, intense love story between two people who accidentally fell in love while studying abroad in Glasgow. It has not deviated from a love story, but rather, it has shifted to focus on who the real love was between: my friends, me, and a place that we all grew to call home. I began this thesis shrouded in mystery, in the idea that what I had experienced was beyond what anyone else had ever done or seen. Surely, I discovered Glasgow for the very first time. But, really, that could not have been further from the truth. And isn't that what I set out to do? To find the truth in my experience rather than the mystery?

I went back to Glasgow a year and a half later, in March of 2024. It was exactly a month before I defended this thesis. I went with the ruse of just re-experiencing Glasgow, of course, but really, I was there to see if I could prove my hypothesis correct: would I feel the same way about Glasgow this far removed from it? Without all of the dopamine spikes all the time? Would I be deconditioned? Part of me didn't want this to be true. Thea and I had been planning this trip for ages, and we were so excited. As soon as I landed, I knew I was right. It was just a place; it was always just a place. I had been the one to create all of the magical thinking around it. Without the constant dopamine spikes that entire three months, the veil I had drawn over Glasgow was suddenly removed. It took Thea and I approximately four hours to do everything we wanted to do in Glasgow. We sat in Paesano Pizza, a place we had frequented every Tuesday at 1:15 for weeks on end and had cried in on our last day, and it was almost...awkward. I knew exactly what was going on. Yes, Glasgow is a great place and I have great, great memories there, but it was also so great because I was with my friends, and we were travelling, and I was falling in love and smoking cigarettes and so on. This revelation does not take away from my experience in any way, shape, or form. However, these memories are just memories, fueled by dopamine and cortisol. Coming to this conclusion has

empowered me and added a layer to my thesis that makes it universally applicable. This happens to people *all the time*. Once the initial feelings wear off, we can see situations more clearly, more as they truly are. I don't need to go back to Glasgow for a while; maybe I will bring my kids there someday. But for now, it can remain as it is, in my heart.

I am not the same person I was before Glasgow, nor am I the same person that started writing this thesis nearly a year and half ago. That's probably a good thing.

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