

There's a special relationship between recklessness and adventure. It's usually built on either stupidity or luck. Preferably the latter.

Living abroad in Europe in your 20's will always automatically warrant a trip to Amsterdam. Therefore, I decided to buy the cheapest plane ticket I could find and pack my bags. I had no idea that the trip itself would be more ridiculous than my destination –

As I said, I bought the cheapest tickets possible. My flight was out of Luton Airport, a place that, little did I know, makes all Londoners cringe universally. It's located about an hour and a half north of London. To make it there without a car, you must first go to central London, and then catch a northbound train. I therefore made my way from Swansea to central London around 2pm. I reached the northbound train station to find a disgruntled crowd of travelers. Apparently, Hurricane Doris was just making landfall in the United Kingdom – trees had been blown over the rail tracks, causing all trains to be cancelled. There was no bus service from London to Luton. The only way to get to the airport was by taxi, which would amount to a nice sum of £100.00. A.K.A.: "Money that a broke study abroad student does not have."

What followed was one of the great novelties of Europe: I split a cab with a Ukrainian, Pole, and Brit. The hour and a half cab ride was filled with interesting and enjoyable conversation. The Brit, a near 30-year-old man named Richard, was stereotypically suave. He had lengthy brown hair, goatee, designer scarf, and a well-fitting leisure suit. He worked for a spirit company, which entailed traveling the world trying the finest alcoholic beverages. He was en route to Malaga Spain to try a rare wine for his company. If the Dos Equis commercial man had an English son, it would be Richard. Elena was a 25-year-old tall slim Polish woman. She had a kind, motherly face and light, shimmering, blonde hair. She was heading to a small village outside of Lublin, Poland to pay a surprise visit to her parents. She worked in the United Kingdom for the NHS. Lastly, there was Oksana, the Ukrainian. She had soft features, light brown hair, and an amazingly warm smile. She was headed to Czechia to go skiing with a close friend. I had never met anyone from Ukraine before, and therefore had hundreds of questions for her. We all shared anecdotes of our home countries as our driver struggled to keep the car steady in the increasingly heavy hurricane winds.

Finally, we made it to Luton Airport. We battled the heavy wind and made it inside to the warmth. Richard and Elena said their goodbyes and ran to catch their flights. Oksana, learning that I was only 20 years old, took it upon herself to act as a motherly figure. She walked me to my check in point and made sure I had all my belongings with me. It took a fair deal of light hearted arguing to convince her that I would survive on my own. I enjoyed her company immensely, but we both had flights to catch.

I made my way up to the check in desk, handed my passport to the airline employee, and gave her my booking number.

"Oh, your flight has just been cancelled!" she says. Just my luck.

“Has a rescheduled flight been announced?” I ask.

“We’ll let you know as soon as we get that information. Please just wait in the queue for the time being.” she replies.

I join a crowd of angry travelers in said queue. Three hours go by. Finally, we get news of our replacement flight: Saturday at 6pm. We would be compensated with a hotel room for Thursday and Friday night. This was pointless to me. My return flight was for Sunday morning. There was no point in taking this flight. Next option, I began searching for my own replacement flight on my phone. I found one that left in the next hour – for £550. Nope. As a last resort, I searched for any public transport that would take me across the channel. I found a bus from Central London to Dover, England that would allow me passage on a Ferry to Calais, France for €5. From Calais, I could hop on a bus to Brussels, Belgium and then another bus to Amsterdam. It sounded like a lot of travel for a lone inexperienced traveler, but there was one ticket left and no time to think. Carefully treading on the fine line between recklessness and adventure, I bought it.

Next problem: The bus leaves central London at 10:00pm. I need to get to the station in two hours and I don’t have £100 pounds for a taxi. I begin to frantically run from information desk to information desk, asking airport employees how to get to London. Each one informed me that the train lines were all still down, and no buses were running anymore due to the intensity of the storm. I begin to lose hope, but decide to ask one more employee just to make sure. As he regretfully informs me that there is no way to get to central London without a taxi, I get a tap on the shoulder.

She was an older woman, probably in her late 50’s or early 60’s, but she had the eyes of a 21-year-old.

“Are you trying to get to London?” She asked.

“Yes, but there’s no way I can get there anymore. I’ve given up.” I replied.

“I’ll drive you.”

“What... why?”

“I’ll be honest with you. I’ve been diagnosed with terminal cancer and have about a year left to live, so I might as well do some [expletive] good in the world before I go. We’re also headed in near the same direction and I have nowhere else to be for the night.”

It was abrupt, harsh, unexpected, and poetic.

“Just don’t be one of those crazy nutters and kill me in my car,” she added jokingly.
Shouldn’t I be the one worried about getting kidnapped and killed in this situation? I thought to myself.

“Well, I study healthcare and medicine back in the United States, so I mostly focus on the opposite of killing people.” I replied.

“Oh, that’s even more worrying then,” she said, giving me a witty look. “I’ve had my fair share of experiences with your doctor sort. But we have a long car ride to speak about all of that.”

Of course, what followed next was a flurry of thank you’s. As I followed her to the parking garage, I offered to compensate her in any way possible. Gas money, paying for food, buying her chocolate, anything. All were shot down immediately.

“One of the fun perks of having terminal cancer is that I don’t have to pay for parking anymore.” She said when I asked to pay for her parking fees.

We entered the car, and what followed for the next hour and a half was one of the most interesting, engrossing, heart elating, and heart deflating conversations I have ever had. We spoke about life, death, and everything in between. We spoke of both of our pasts, our presents, and our futures. I shared my dream of becoming a physician. She shared her nightmares of becoming a patient. Above all, I listened.

Her name was Joy. Here was a woman, filled with life but awaiting death.

Joy’s diagnosis was rare, but workable. Nearly 88% of patients faced only a benign form and had years in front of them. Her cancer was treatable in its early stages. She had undergone it all. Chemo, Mastectomy, medication and eradicated many of the tumors. She regained what you could call hope. Then, right before I met her, she found out that she fell within the 12% that faced the malignant form. She was given about a year left.

Joy wasn’t dejected. She had thought about it. Healthcare in England is subsidized by the NHS, and therefore, there was a variety of treatments which she could undergo that could improve the longevity of her life at an affordable cost. However, it was not quantity she worried about, but quality. Should she choose to undergo more intensive chemotherapy treatments, just to be bedridden for weeks at a time? A year of healthy life? Or 5 years of ventilators, respirators, pills, and prescriptions? She chose to die naturally, and face her disease head on.

We spoke about her death for much of our car ride to London. We spoke of the paradoxes in healthcare. We have the technology to help people survive, but not live. Many doctors and prospective doctors (including myself) have never been patients. I had no idea what it’s like to experience what she was going through. I could only listen. Could I offer my sympathy? Yes. My empathy? I hope.

A simple car ride was not enough for us. We needed more time together. With about half an hour to my bus departure from Central London, we decided to visit a small café near her home. It was one of those vintage places. She explained to me the history behind her neighborhood. It consisted of a large Greek settlement, giving the old English cobblestones a Mediterranean essence. The coffee shop held the same aesthetic. Small, dim, with mossy green

vines growing throughout the dark wood floors and small fairy lights lining the walls. In one corner, there was a book exchange, in another, a vinyl player.

Here, it was my turn to talk about life. I spoke to her about my family. I told her about the accolade and success my father, sister, uncles, and cousins have all earned in their fields of medicine. I told her about my lack of this accolade and success coupled with the pressure of achieving something that would help me stand amongst my family members. I told her about my childhood of being raised an American Muslim in Post-9/11 Texas. Joy had a unique skill of being able to listen. Truly listen. She nodded her head, she maintained meaningful eye contact, she interjected and observed at the perfect moments. After speaking with a woman facing death, I felt more alive. Joy advised me to live in ways that she could no longer live.

Unfortunately, time could not stop. The clock was ticking and I needed to board my bus to make it to Amsterdam. I was half in mind to skip it, but Joy insisted that I go gain the experience of travel. Despite my protest and bickering, she purchased a to-go sandwich for me to have during the journey and dropped me off right at the front of the station.

We exchanged phone numbers and email addresses. I extended my hand to hers. She grabbed it and pulled me in for a hug.

Joy and I have kept in touch whenever possible. We have sent texts and emails describing our lives and activities. On 21st my birthday, I traveled to London in hopes of having tea with her, but understandably, she was not feeling well enough to do so. We took a rain check for another time.

To be honest, my last email has not yet received a response. I feel like an anxious teen staring at my phone waiting for a text back. However, the reasoning for my anxiety isn't entirely the same anymore. As a teenager, it was always: "am I cool enough to get a response?"

Now, it creeps into the territory of: "Is she still alive and well enough to respond?"

I think I could write for ages about our dialogue. The discussion was rich, and there were so many little nuances that made this experience riveting. There is so much more about her life that I would love to explore and explain. There are so many things she had said that made me truly think about the way I viewed my own life. Hopefully I can revisit this journal entry one day and rewrite it to include these. Especially after further developing my literary skills. I feel like my current amateurism doesn't do this story much justice, but nothing is better than something at least.

Ultimately, Joy as a reminder to look at the joy in life. She is a reminder to do some [expletive] good in the world. She is a reminder that sometimes, listening is the most important part of a dialogue. She is a reminder to take a hold of the life that is given to you and live it to the fullest. She is a reminder that although there is an end in life, there is also life in the end.